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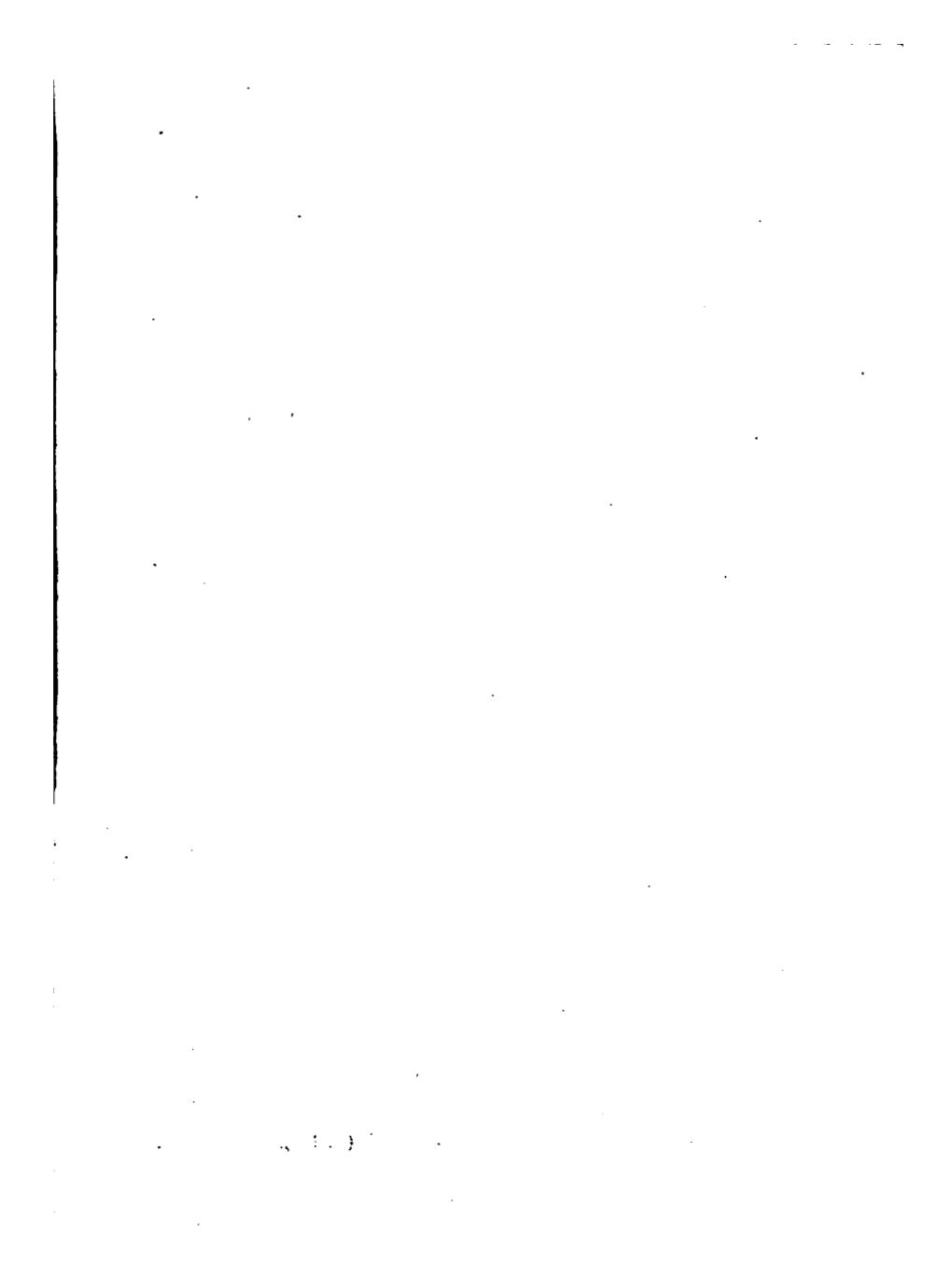
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"MISS STANMORE, I BEG YOUR PARDON" (p. 191).

THE FEDERAL BUREAU OF INVESTIGATION

U. S. DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE

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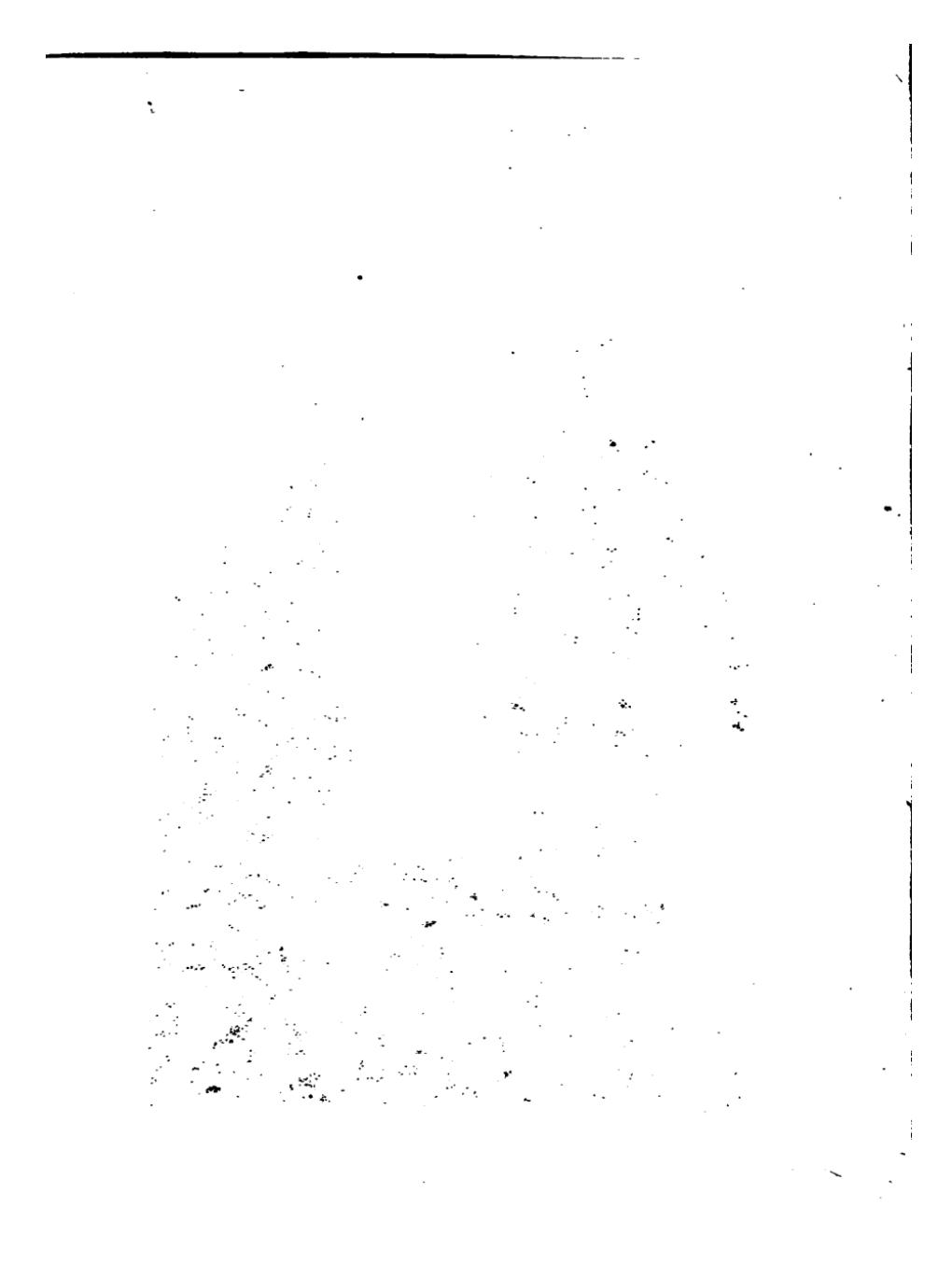
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THE DINGY HOUSE

AT



KENSINGTON

Every day

"Men at some time are masters of their fates :
The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars,
But in ourselves."

"I pray thee sort thy heart to patience."
Shakespeare

NEW YORK

G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS

27 AND 29 WEST 23D STREET

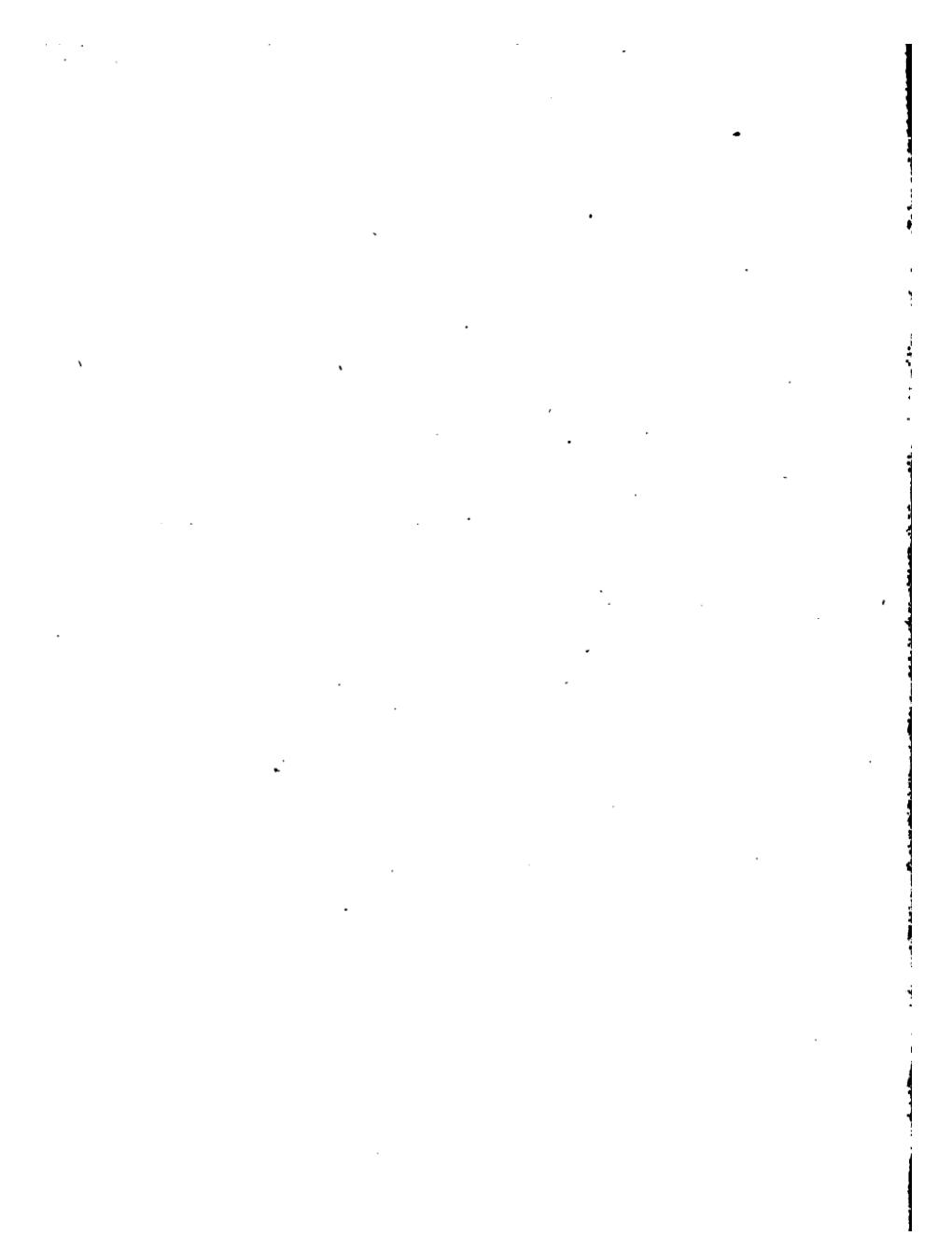
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P R E F A C E.

“THE Dingy House at Kensington” was published under that name in a magazine early in 1872. It then consisted of the first part of the following story and of some passages in the second and third parts. The rest appears now for the first time.



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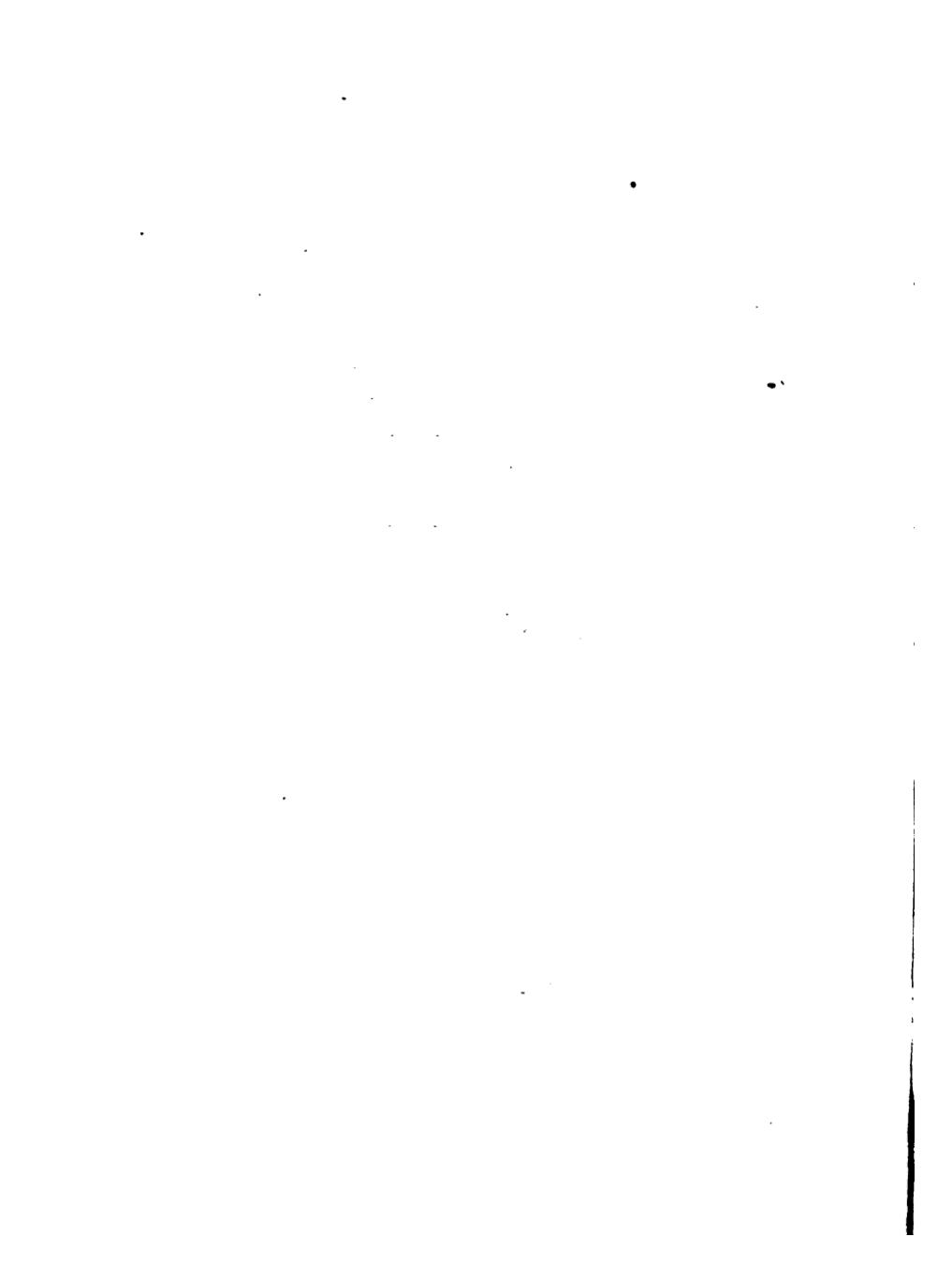
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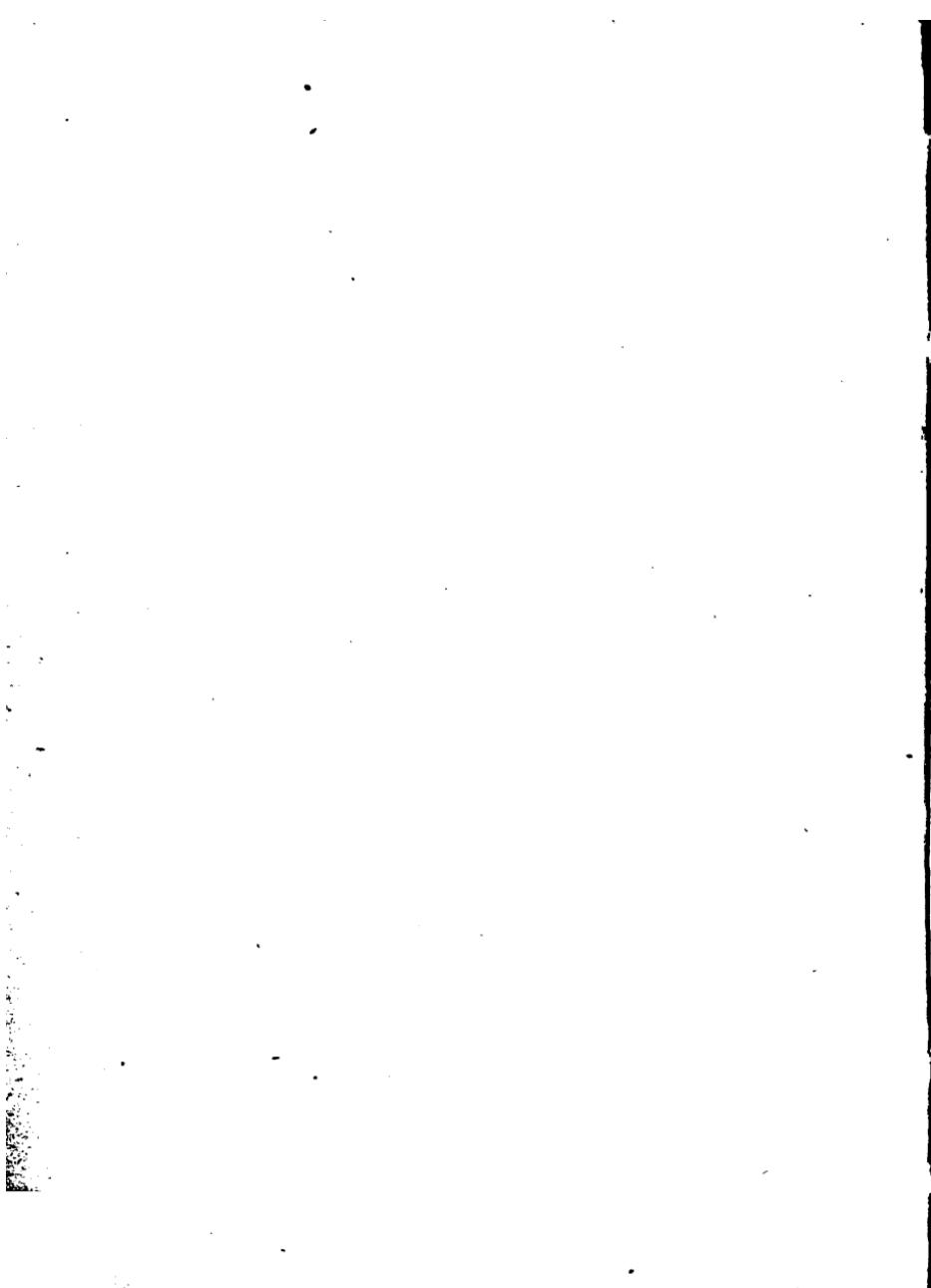
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THE
DINGY HOUSE AT KENSINGTON.

Part I.

CHAPTER I.

THE DAWSONS.



ER name was Polly, and her nose turned up. She was not strictly pretty—the defect to which your attention has been so immediately drawn prevented that—yet her face was one which, if once seen, was always remembered. She had beautiful eyes—almost black eyes, with heavy white lids and long dark lashes; and with her hair twisted up round her head, yet drooping low over her forehead, with the slight colour she usually had in her cheeks, her clear brunette complexion, her red pouting lips, and with the light resting on her face, she looked at times not merely pretty, but almost beautiful. Her face was fit for a Greek slave, in spite of the objectionable little nose, which was such a contradiction to any classical thought concerning her, fit for a painter's ideal, or to play tyrant over any man's heart—fit for any comparison you please, or to rival the perfect face of any accepted beauty. There was a half-lazy expression in it, a dreamy, sleepy look of inquiry about the usually only half-opened eyes, a saucy, slightly-defiant smile about the mouth, a something, you scarcely knew what, about the face that you could not forget. She was not strictly lady-like, perhaps, any more than she was strictly pretty, but she

was certainly not the reverse ; and she had a quiet, easy, don't-care air of self-possession, yet not too self-assertive, that was almost graceful. She was fond of trinkets, of beads, of twisting bright-coloured things round her throat, knowing perfectly well that they made her look picturesque, and of wearing a bit of bright-coloured ribbon in her hair. She liked doing elaborate fancy-work, which she cobbled and made grubby before it was finished ; or trying to play brilliant compositions on the piano which were utterly beyond her, for she could only master pretty memory-haunting snatches, and the quaint simple little ballads which so well suited her low, sweet, but not very cultivated, voice. She delighted in getting a book she could not understand (she could laugh or cry over a love-story, but there her perceptive powers regarding literature ended), and after lazily reading a page or two in her father's easy-chair, leaning back her head and going to sleep with the book over her nose ; and yet she was quick and bright, and, on the whole, clever. Her gloves often had holes in them, and buttons were seldom on them after the second time of wearing. She was even capable of tearing a flounce off her dress and sticking it on with a pin. She was wilful and impatient, and indolent and coquettish, and yet she was never unwomanly, and always, in whatever mood it suited her capricious temper to be in, loveable.

Her father and mother were an odd couple in their way—the most matter-of-fact people in the world ; and yet it had been a runaway match. Mrs. Dawson was rather proud of the feat, and delighted in publishing it, and in telling Polly, in an almost simple, childish manner (she was a simple, childish woman, in spite of her fifty years, and her share of the cares and troubles of this weary world), that she was not half so pretty a girl as her mother had been before her.

“I must have been worth looking at,” she would add conclusively, “for your father eloped with me, and no one ever ran away with an ugly girl, unless she was an heiress, which I was not ; for your poor dear grandfather

was only a country curate, with three daughters to bring up and educate, all on his stipend, which he did, very much to his credit."

Thus she totally ignored the facts of the case, which were simply that Henry Dawson had been as stingy when a young man as he was miserly when a middle-aged one, and knew that by getting married on the sly, he not only escaped a fuss but a considerable expense. She was a nervous little woman, childish, and apt to be pettish, and to make pettish little speeches, indolent, like her daughter, and fond of finery, delighting in being made much of, and in bewailing in strict confidence to a sympathising friend Mr. Dawson's increasing love of money and aversion to part from it.

Above all, however, Mrs. Dawson loved recounting anecdotes of her youthful days and the society in which she had then moved. Her father had been the curate of Benthwaite, in the lake district, and his cloth gave him and his three daughters a position, though a threadbare one. The "gentry," as the tradespeople called them, which consisted of a few good old families living in good old-fashioned houses, surrounded by land and built under the shelter of the hills, considered themselves bound occasionally to ask the curate to dinner, and one or two of his daughters with him, as they grew up. This was how Mrs. Dawson had seen "society." She had never forgotten the gloomy glories of those solemn dinner-parties, at which she never saw a new face, nor heard any subject discussed the interest of which was not centred in or confined to Benthwaite.

"You know, Polly," Mrs. Dawson would say to her daughter, "your poor grandpapa, as clergyman of the place, was able to give his daughters introductions into such excellent society, and, though I say it, we were never anything but a credit to him. I shall never forget how nice your Aunt Maria and I looked one November, when we went to the Laurels—the Brandfords lived there; they do to this day, indeed—we had new white muslins for the occasion."

" Didn't they get very crumpled ? " asked Polly.

" No, miss, they did not, " Mrs. Dawson replied emphatically. " In my days girls were quiet and subdued, and took care of their dresses, and were not fast, nor hoydenish, nor masculine, as they are now."

" Oh ! " answered Polly, feeling slightly snubbed, but not knowing why, for she was not any one of the three, though she felt self-conscious, as one is apt to do when some unknown person is talked at, and only two are present.

It had been rather a relief to the curate when, as his daughters reached maturity, Henry Dawson, then working hard for the law (he was a solicitor), had proposed for the youngest. The young man was steady and persevering, and his affection for Mammon was not then so fully developed. So the curate was not very angry when one morning he heard that they had quietly entered into the bonds of holy matrimony, without either his permission or assistance. His second daughter soon afterwards married a rising young doctor of Kendal, in Westmoreland, and the eldest remained at Benthwaite in single blessedness, which was rendered comfortable by a snug little legacy from an almost unknown aunt, who died just before the curate finished his quiet life, and was carried to his home, outside those walls, within which his voice had so often told the weary and heavy-laden of Him who giveth rest.

Since her marriage Mrs. Dawson had only once, three years afterwards, visited her native place. Mr. Dawson had been too niggardly to allow her to spend much money in travelling, which was hard on Benthwaite, for it had been profitable, and even generous, to him. Many of those who had once invited his wife to their houses had remembered that her husband was a struggling man, and when they wanted legal advice had written to, and occasionally come to consult him. Still he was ungrateful : it was his nature which would not let him pay his wife's fare down to see those who remembered that " she used to be a nice unpretending

girl," any more than it would let him listen to her own plaintive little remark, that she did "so long to see the purple heather on the hills again."

" You see," she observed one day to Polly, after she had recounted the family history almost as it has thus been given, " you see, we all turned out well, my dear."

" Yes, mamma, you did," she answered affectionately. She loved her mother, and all the childish, pettish, undecided ways of her weak nature. " On the whole, grandpapa's three daughters were not such a bad speculation, after all, in spite of his shallow pocket; were they, mamma?"

" Speculation! what do you mean? Daughters are human beings, and not speculations."

" Oh, I thought——" Polly began, with an idea of saying something wonderfully clever, but not able to put it in words at the moment; and when she was, it was too late for a repartee, however brilliant, to take effect. The number of clever things left unsaid, because they are invented just half a second too late, is lamentable.

Henry Dawson was a miser by nature. Saving, with him, was a cardinal virtue, and one which ruled every action of his life. He had only married for the same reason that he had taken the dingy-looking house at Kensington, to gain the social position he considered necessary for his professional prosperity; and he had acquired both wife and house in an economical manner. The first was a poor man's daughter, and he carefully assured her that she would only be a poor man's wife, though he was then making a comfortable income, which was yearly increasing; nay, he even said to her in their courting days, in the semi-pathetic voice he always assumed when he wanted to carry a point, " You will remember that I am a poor man, and you won't hanker after fine dresses, and trinkets, and other useless things, will you, Mary? They don't make you look a bit better; indeed, you look far prettier in your simple dresses than if you wore the finery of a duchess."

And the simple country girl forgot her fancy for gewgaws, and answered him simply, "Oh yes, Henry ; if I only look nice in your eyes, what do I care?"

A woman has always an utter absence of selfishness towards the man she fancies herself in love with, and there is something grateful to her nature in giving up to him anything she has cared or thought much of previously. Thus the knowledge that she would never possess the silks and satins, for which she had so often longed, rather strengthened her feeling towards him than otherwise, just as we often feel grateful towards one for whom we have done a generous action—he has given us something pleasant to remember.

"That's right, dear," he answered, pleased to have gained his point, yet not of a sufficiently sensitive nature to understand the little concession she had made, almost without being aware of it. So he won his wife inexpensively, and took her home to shabby lodgings over the offices he rented in the City, where she would probably have spent the greater part of her married life, if chance had not befriended her.

An elder brother of her husband's, almost the only relation he had in the world, a good-natured, easy, generous fellow—the opposite of Henry Dawson in every way—obtained an excellent appointment abroad ; and having a house of furniture, not handsome, yet good, and little the worse for wear, he made it a parting gift to his brother.

"I don't believe you would ever have common sense enough to buy any for yourself," he said ; "and I have come into a good thing in getting this post, so you and your wife may have the sticks, my contribution towards giving you a start in life ; do you see, Harry ? And don't keep that poor little woman, who has been used to fresh air all her life, mewed up in the City any longer. Take a house, and let her feel she has a home ; besides, it will make you look like a respectable professional man, and be ten per cent. in your pocket in the long run." By this last clause he unconsciously carried the day.

"I believe you are as rich as a Jew already with your hoarding ways," he added.

"I've nothing to hoard; nothing at all; it's a struggle to make the two ends meet."

"You take care to keep the ends so far apart," his brother answered.

Soon afterwards he bought the lease of the house at Kensington from a bankrupt client for a mere song, exulting inwardly that he escaped paying anything extra for fixtures. Thus he gained cheaply, as far as appearances could give it him, a social position.

He was a strange man, working early and late at his profession, taking no one into his confidence, hoarding and saving for no visible purpose; for he grudged spending a penny even on his son, the only child he had besides Polly, though he cared for him more than for anything in the world, after his money. Do not imagine that he was a conventional miser, thin and lantern-jawed, and grim-mannered, sitting up at night to count his gain, and hoarding it away in bags, after the approved and supposed custom of his class. He was nothing of the kind; he was an intensely bland and chatty and polite man. His ruling passion was never guessed beyond his household, even by those who knew him best; for, though he was never known to do a generous action, or to give away a single penny piece in charity, still it is astonishing what suavity and blandness will do, and of these Henry Dawson perfectly understood the power. He fraternised with men by appearing to adapt his views to their opinions. He made love, in a highly platonic and harmless manner, to women, he petted children, and he stroked animals; it all cost nothing, could do him no harm, and might, and did, do him some good. People said he was a humbug, but why they said it they did not exactly know. He had few firm friends, for no one thoroughly believed in him, but he had no fixed enemies. He had long ago left the offices he rented when he first married, had gone into partnership with a clever pains-taking lawyer, who had put a good round sum into the

concern, had airy offices in the Old Jewry, and an established position. Altogether, Dawson and Albury was a flourishing legal firm.

At home, though he was cold and apathetic, he was neither harsh nor unkind in any but money matters, and then he cloaked his meanness with the plea of poverty and anxiety for the future. His house was good-sized and fairly furnished, but many a cottager was richer in comfort and luxury than its inhabitants. He grudged every penny spent in household comfort ; he considered the price of the bread and butter a guest would consume ; he never invited a soul to dinner, unless he imagined that in doing so he gained more than the entertainment cost, and then a speech about "simplicity and a welcome" covered his meanness. His wife did not dare indulge in the simplest addition to her dinner-table, the merest relish to her breakfast, without asking his permission. He knew when the coals came in, and how long they should last ; he knew when his wife and daughter had new dresses, and, if they asked for more, suggested that the old ones should be turned. He grudged the one servant they kept ; he made them go to bed early to save firing and gas ; he would not let them take sittings in church, and reluctantly rescued them from the free seats by giving the pew-opener half-a-crown at Christmas. Mrs. Dawson had a housekeeping book, which was so closely examined that she had no little pickings for herself. Polly had no pocket-money, and had to treasure up her occasional present of a sovereign from her Aunt Maria, and be as careful over the ribbons she purchased therewith, as were the daughters of even poorer men than her father over precious stones and trinkets.

Jack, the only member of the family not yet described, was a clever, delicate boy, and the one person for whom Henry Dawson cared ; yet he grudged even him the luxuries his health required (he had outgrown his strength), and absolutely refused to supply them. "He did not want them," he said ; "boys of his age were always listless and languid if they grew too fast ;

and to pamper him up would only prevent his getting hardy." And so the boy pined and coughed and grew thin, and turned from the untempting food he could not eat. He was not like other boys; he had never associated with them, for his mother had taught him his early lessons (as Polly, who had, however, "picked up" most of what she knew, had been taught before him); but she complained, when he had mastered the rudiments of his own language, that she could not teach a boy so easily as a girl, and asked her husband to do for Jack what she would not have dared ask him to do for herself, to expend money, and send him to school. He evaded her petition, however, though he was himself anxious that the boy should be well educated; "next year, if he could afford it, he should go." So Jack had still his mother for a schoolmistress, and Polly for playfellow and companion.

CHAPTER II.

MR. DAWSON SURPRISES HIS FAMILY.



REDERIC and Henry Dawson seldom troubled each other with letters; they had little in common between them, and the latter was too saving both of time and postage-stamps, to waste them on what, he considered, would probably be a profitless correspondence. When Jack, however, was about nine years of age, and after nearly five years of silence, the solicitor was agreeably surprised, on going down to his office one morning, to find a letter from his brother. It contained the surprising news that he wished Jack to be well educated, for, having no children of his own, he intended eventually to do something for him, and a request that his brother would send him at once to a good school, towards which expense he was willing to contribute fifty pounds a year.

That letter took Henry Dawson completely by surprise; it was a pleasant reflection for him all through the day, and for once there was a shade of unselfishness in his pleasure. He was scrupulous in keeping everything from his family as a rule; he never told them little incidents of his professional life, nor listened with interest to any domestic details which, if encouraged, they would have been only too glad to relate; he was not congenial, but for once he thought he must take them into his confidence, and he was anxious, from almost kindly feelings, that evening to return to them. He always walked home—it was a saving; moreover, he liked the exercise, and the quiet hour and a half it took him to get from the City to Kensington gave him time to think over his plans for the morrow and arrange his ideas. He was never hurried, for he had no anxious

cook at home, fearful lest her master's lateness should dim the glories of the dinner-table. He dined frugally in the City in the middle of the day—calling it lunch—while his household dined still more frugally at the same hour at home; and a shabby tea-table at seven o'clock (a repast which was followed by no cosy little supper) was the only gastronomic entertainment which by courtesy required his presence of an evening. He walked quickly to Hyde Park, then inside the railings, till he reached Kensington Gardens. It was a lovely night—a clear, mild October evening, with the moonlight glinting through the dark trees, heavy with dew, which had just a touch of frost in it, and with the stars peering pitifully, through the branches, at the leaves which were fast strewing the pathway. Henry Dawson had no love of stars or trees or deepening shadows, but he walked inside the park railings because it was quieter, and he wanted to think again over that unexpected letter from his brother.

“I am very glad about Jack,” he said; “his mother and Polly will be satisfied now. They always said I would do nothing for him, and they were right.” He stopped, for a thought suddenly came across him. “Why should they know it? It will only give them an excellent excuse for being more extravagant than they are already, if they know I spend nothing on the boy. Fred meant it for a benefit to me as well as for Jack, and why should he be taught to consider his uncle more generous than his father?” Then he walked quickly on, without once stopping till he reached his own street-door, when, by the aid of a latch-key, he let himself quietly into the unlighted hall. He was a cat-like man in some things, moving softly, seeing quickly, and hiding his ugly nature under his blandness, as that animal hides its claw behind its fur.

Jack and Polly were sitting by the dining-room fire, and the first words their father heard decided him fully how to act, if he had had any lingering doubt concerning his brother's letter.

"I thought I heard father," the boy said discontentedly; "didn't you?"

"No," answered Polly; "it was only Jane taking candles into the study, to be lighted when he comes. I don't think it is quite time for him yet."

"I'm so glad. We are so much jollier by ourselves, ain't we, Polly dear? Go on. 'And then the beast turned into a prince again.'"

"'A prince again,'" continued Polly, "'and said, 'Dear Beauty, will you marry me?' and Beauty answered, 'Yes, dear Beast.' And she did, and they lived happy ever after.'"

"Oh! is that all? I say, Polly, wasn't he a nice fellow? Wouldn't you like to have been that beast?"

"Yes," replied his sister, "pretty well; but I think I would rather have been Beauty."

Then Mr. Dawson made himself heard, and Polly lighted one burner of the massive gas chandelier, which, as she often inwardly remarked, looked bald from want of re-gilding, and established herself at the head of the tea-table.

"Jack," said his father presently, "you look pale; are you ill?"

"Maria wrote to day," put in Mrs. Dawson, "and she says she told Dr. Gibbs about Jack, and he says he ought to have plenty of strengthening things."

Dr. Gibbs was the Benthwaite doctor, and the medical wonder of the world in Mrs. Dawson's eyes.

"Oh, nonsense, Mary, those country quacks are like so many old women. Jack," he continued, with a wonderful impulse of generosity, "jump up, and I'll give you a shilling for marbles."

Jack raised himself, and looked at his father doubtfully. Polly opened her eyes very wide, made her mouth very round, and exclaimed, "Oh! oh, Jack!"

"No, no," he went on nervously, "you don't care for marbles; you are too big a boy, too much of a man for such things, are you not, Jack? But I'll tell you what I'll do—I'll send you to school."

"Will you really, Henry?" and Mrs. Dawson started up, while Polly exclaimed again, "Oh, Jack! Jack, darling!"

"And will you let it be a good school?" Mrs. Dawson asked, still unbelieving.

"Yes, of course; I like to do things well. I will spend fifty pounds a year on him—"

"Fifty pounds!" They thought he was mad. It seemed to them a magnificent sum, only to be dreamt of in dreams and spoken of in whispers.

"Or less," he said hastily; his nature triumphing over his honesty.

"Mr. Dale, the clergyman, takes pupils," Polly said: "such nice boys, all the sons of gentlemen, and he only charges twelve guineas a term, three terms in a year—that's less than fifty pounds."

"Yes, I should like him to go there," echoed Mrs. Dawson. "He only takes six boys, all the sons of gentlemen."

It seemed to her that sending the boy to the curate with the six sons of gentlemen was a more dignified proceeding than sending him to an ordinary school.

"It sounds very nice indeed, my dear," the lawyer said in his blandest tone. "I think it most probable Jack will go there. I must think it over, and see Mr. Dale, and then I will consult you again, my dear;" which meant that, when Mr. Dawson had made up his mind, he would tell his wife what he meant to do. "Consulting her again" was his pleasant way of putting it.

Then he retired to his study, and pulled out his brother's letter, and read it again. That letter was an anxiety to him. It ran thus:

"I dare say you will be surprised to hear from me, but I have one or two things I wish to tell you. As you know, my wife died some four years since, and shortly afterwards our only child. The double sorrow has made me an old man already, and will, I hope, shortly be an excuse for my retiring from my post. I

am not a rich man, but I am thankful to say I am not a very poor one, for besides my pay here I have made something in other ways. I am certainly not a strong one, and I have been considering lately what I shall do with my little wealth in the event of death overtaking me. I shall not tell you of my intentions further than that I do not intend to enrich you personally, but I have thought a good deal of your boy since I lost my own, and if he turns out well, I shall help to provide for him." Then followed the arrangement for Jack's education.

"Arranging this is not the only object of my letter," he continued. "I have had few friends in life, but the one I prized most among them was poor Bob Welch. When he died, before I left England, I promised I would look after his lad (the mother died soon after his birth), and this I have endeavoured to do. He has been living with an aunt and uncle at Liverpool, and is now a young man of two or three and twenty. He had a fancy for a mercantile life, and obtained a situation in an office at Liverpool; but as it was not likely to lead to anything better, I wrote to the head of a well-known firm with whom I had formerly some acquaintance, asking him if he could find room for the lad, and intimating that matters would be smoothed financially towards his working his way up to a responsible position. I intend doing something for him myself; and his mother's relations are well-to-do, and have no children of their own. My friend replied by saying they had a vacant desk in their branch house in London, and this they offered young Welch. I do not wish him, being utterly friendless in the great metropolis, to fall into harm's way, and shall be glad if you would make it a point to look after him; ask him to your house, and see that he takes up his abode in some respectable family, who will not think it a part of their duty to swindle him. I know your careful habits, but in carrying out this wish of mine you shall not incur any pecuniary loss. I have directed him to call upon you, and hope

to hear soon that he is on friendly terms with your family.

"I have written you so long a letter that I shall almost expect you to send me in a lawyer's bill for reading it."

"Too bad of Frederic to judge me so harshly," the lawyer said to himself; "too bad of him," he added, not angrily, but mildly, rubbing his hands as he made his observations. He was seldom unmannerly, even mentally; he generally gained his ends, but whether he did or not, in every phase of his life he preserved his suavity. His very feelings were blandly civil to each other, and he never had a second thought that did not treat the first with politeness. "Too bad of Frederic; he's a good fellow, though, and as impulsive as ever. We were both of us always impulsive, that was our fault. I had no idea that he made anything beyond his pay," he continued. "Yes, I'll carry out his wish about young Welch, or he may stand in Jack's way. People ought to consider that what they have belongs to their family, and not spend their money beyond it; I never do on principle;" forgetting that he never spent any even in it, if he could possibly help it, and believing in his own words. Some people are apt to be dreadful hypocrites towards themselves.

So Jack was sent to Mr. Dale's, to the great joy of his proud mother, who watched him with tears in her eyes, as he went off the first morning to take his place among the six sons of gentlemen. "His poor dear grandfather would have been so pleased," she sighed; "and his Aunt Maria will be glad, and will be sure to tell them down at Benthwaite that he goes to Mr. Dale's." It never occurred to her in her innocent egotism, that she and her affairs could have ceased to be remembered and discussed by the great people of her native place.

One evening, perhaps a month after Jack first went to Mr. Dale's, Mr. Dawson made a second communication to his family. "A gentleman will call here to-

morrow evening," he said, addressing his wife; "I wish you to be polite to him, and—and perhaps you had better ask him to have a cup of tea."

"A gentleman!" exclaimed Mrs. Dawson in excessive, yet mildly expressed, surprise. "Who is he, Henry dear?" The thought of a stranger always fluttered her a little, and set her thinking with unconscious pleasure of the particulars concerning Benthwaite she could give him, and made her feel, with a little satisfaction which she modestly depreciated to herself, that no doubt he would rather like her. Polly asked a good sensible question in a practical voice that carried the day.

"Is he young or old?"

"Young; he is a sort of *protégé* of my brother's, who has asked me to look after him, for he has only just come from Liverpool. If I fail to do so, he may get into all sorts of debt and bad habits, and call upon my brother to assist him; so that I consider it almost a duty to carry out his request." Mr. Dawson was getting communicative; they were quite astonished.

"Hadn't we better get something nice for tea?" inquired Mrs. Dawson, with a hazy vision of smoking muffins before her eyes.

"No, certainly not," Mr. Dawson answered; "it is wrong to give a young man a taste for luxuries and ideas of extravagance in any way. I should feel that I failed to carry out my brother's wishes if I did so. The most beautiful element in life, my dear, is simplicity." Mr. Dawson was fond of ending his remarks with little moral tags, especially when the morality favoured his own views.

There was a long pause, and then the lawyer went on again. "I was thinking," he said, "that we so seldom use the drawing-rooms, and that as Fred is anxious I should look after young Welch, it would not be a bad idea if we allowed him to have them and reside here."

"Wouldn't it be wearing out the furniture for nothing at all?" asked Polly, who considered quickly that any one living in the house would find out in what

very old slippers and shabby dresses she was compeiled to array herself in the morning: women see so far mentally.

"Let him live here for nothing!" Mrs. Dawson exclaimed.

"No," her husband replied meekly, "not for nothing; that would be a false kindness. But we really do not want those rooms, and he might as well pay me, us I mean, as any one else. Do not poke up the fire, Mary, I have told you of that so often; always pat it down, the heat is then concentrated and sent out in greater force, and poking it up makes the coals flare uselessly away—remember that, and pat it down. You see, I have a great many expenses now; sending Jack to school costs a good deal, so it would really be a help."

"But a lodger," Polly began deprecatingly.

"I should not like it at all, Henry," Mrs. Dawson said uneasily. "Only think if it ever got down to Benthwaite; besides, what would Mrs. Albury say? I should be so ashamed not to ask her up into the drawing-room if she called."

"How is it possible for any one to hear of it at Benthwaite?" her husband asked severely. "You are much too ready in your remarks, Polly. He would not be a lodger. You could say he was a ward of your uncle's, and resided with us; that will be the truth."

"Or the fiction will be a pleasant one, at all events," Polly said, stroking her beads, and thinking, "I wonder what he will think of *me*?"

"As for the Alburys," he continued, "they need not know it, for we could always have the use of the drawing-room when we required it."

"So we could," Mrs. Dawson answered, feeling like the everlastingly-quoted man who, being too obstinate to give in gracefully, is convinced against his will and remains of the same opinion. "I can't bear that Mrs. Albury, she always seems to think herself somebody; they have everything in such style, you see."

Mrs. Albury was the wife of Mr. Dawson's partner, and they (the Alburys) were slightly purse-proud people, who lived quite up to their means, and, as almost a natural consequence, Mrs. Albury was a little patronising, and Mrs. Dawson a little envious. Once a year they exchanged civilities; the Dawsons dined with the Alburys, and Mrs. Dawson left feeling spiteful; and the Alburys dined with the Dawsons, and Mrs. Albury left feeling contemptuous.

CHAPTER III.

ROBERT WELCH APPEARS.



OLLY made up her mind that Robert Welch would prove a hero and look like one; and when he appeared she was woefully disappointed. She put new crimson ribbons in her hair and round her throat, she put on her best beads and her daintiest collar, she laid the tea-table three times before she was satisfied with it, and she expended a shilling of her scanty stock of pocket-money, so that the hero might not think that tea-table shabby. She looked a dozen times in the glass, insisted on her mamma wearing her best cap, which her mamma was only too delighted to do, gave Jack careful instructions how he was to behave, and waited with the greatest impatience for the hero's double knock; and when she heard it, she felt the colour come to her face and her heart throb with agitation.

When he appeared, she saw a quiet, self-possessed-looking young man, with nothing particular to distinguish him, and with not a single attribute with which she had mentally endowed him—a slight, fair young man, with a pale face and gentlemanlike manners; not handsome, neither witty nor brilliant; not very clever, but with a business-like air about him that insensibly made Polly turn up her nose a little more than nature had done already. He seemed pleased to find a home in the Dawson family, and explained that he did not go out much, as he was delicate, and had to avoid the night air. He talked chiefly to Mr. Dawson; he never looked once at the crimson ribbon, and Polly felt convinced he did not notice her beads. He said he regretted leaving

Liverpool, but hoped to return when the firm by which he was employed could find room for him there. He looked at the drawing-rooms, thought gas would be bad for his eyes, and observed that he should only light one burner, as two would make the rooms too warm. He agreed to come the next day, thanked the lawyer for his kindness, chatted a few moments with Mrs. Dawson, scarcely spoke to Polly, and took his leave, tying a woollen comforter round his throat for fear of the cold.

"A very sensible young man," said Mr. Dawson. "I shall invite him down of an evening after tea; and remember, Polly, he is delicate, so do not keep too large a fire;" and the lawyer retreated to his study.

"I think he liked me," Mrs. Dawson said, "he was so polite. I daresay he could see I was a lady, you know, and thought it was very kind of me to receive him into my house," forgetting how little she had had to do with his reception. "Well, you see I am not a purse-proud thing like Mrs. Albury is, though her father was only a doctor: not an M.D. either; and I am not sarcastic like that Margaret Albury, am I, Polly?" she asked in perfect innocence, glorifying herself in the most self-satisfied manner.

"No, mamma;" her daughter answered with dutiful readiness.

"Well," continued Mrs. Dawson, a little entreatingly, and smoothing the bands of her hair, "and I am not as plain as Mrs. Albury, am I?" The last words came as softly and mock-doubtfully as a coquette appealing to her lover, and with a hurried look in the direction of the glass, which showed clearly from whom Polly had inherited her vanity.

"No, mamma, that you are not," and she looked affectionately at her mother, and meant her negative.

"He didn't seem to take to you, Polly; I wonder why that was? He seems a very nice young man, and I shouldn't have been surprised if he had been struck with you; perhaps he may be yet, who knows?" Mrs. Dawson could weave a romance out of a cobweb.

"I don't think he will," Polly said; "I don't think he is at all a romantic individual."

"Somehow girls are not admired as they once were," her mother continued; "I know I used often to hear of their being eloped with. Your father ran away with me, my dear, as you know; not that your poor dear grandfather would have objected, though I daresay I might have done better;" well knowing that in all probability she would never have had any chance of doing better or worse. "And I remember hearing in those days of girls being once seen, their names found out, and an offer of marriage coming by the next post from some one who turned out to be very rich, and all manner of things."

"No one ever thinks of such a thing in these days," said Polly; "I wish they did."

"Well, I shall read my book now," said Mrs. Dawson. She was fond of reading, especially love stories, which she generally borrowed of the abused Mrs. Albury: love stories which ended in universal wretchedness Mrs. Dawson preferred. She was quite tired of the conventional winding up with a marriage, and the assurance of every one being impossibly happy; she preferred that they should all die after making pathetic speeches, or that the lovers of the story should each marry the wrong person, and for the rest of their miserable lives do their duty in the most heroic manner, while their hearts bewailed their dismal fate, and their consciences silently sang psalms of self-praise and glorification. Then she felt sorry for them and compassionate, and thought of the "poor things" with lingering tenderness, and sorrowfully delighted in the unhappiness her heart would have ached to witness. "I wonder if Mr. Welch will have any books with him?" she said; "if so, he can lend them to me. Jack, I wish you would learn to play a pretty tune instead of those stupid scales; I am sure Mr. Welch won't like them." And Mrs. Dawson, having expressed her views and opinions, generally left her offspring to their own resources.

Jack took refuge in "The Carnival of Venice," which became a most eccentric carnival under his treatment ; and Polly took the red ribbon out of her hair, looked at it affectionately, wrapped it up in tissue-paper, and put it by for more appreciative eyes on another occasion. To-night, she reflected with a little regretful sigh, the beauty of that ribbon had decidedly been wasted on the desert air.

"He isn't a bit like what I imagined," she pouted ; "he hasn't even broad shoulders, or big hands, or a gruff voice," not in the least knowing what made her consider these necessary qualifications for a hero. "I am sure *he* will never elope with any one; I shouldn't think he'll ever get the chance. Oh, no," she repeated to herself, "he isn't the least bit in the world like what I expected ; he never looked at me, and he talks about the night air, and puts a woollen 'comforter' round his neck!"

In three days Polly had discovered that his apparent insensibility was merely the result of nervous shyness, which, in spite of his seeming self-possession, was one of his strongest characteristics ; when this had worn off, and he was quite at his ease, he had pleasant manners, was good-natured and easy-tempered. He was very punctual, never left the house in the morning a second later than the appointed time, did his work well, and when it was done he did nothing—that is, he never read, and seldom followed any intellectual pursuit. Accordingly he had little or no general or special knowledge, and but few subjects for conversation. He was fond of figures and clever at them, never in any way shirked his office duty, and threw all his energy into it ; so he was popular with his employers, spoken of as being "cut out of the stuff of which rich men are made," and promised to become an excellent man of business. Of an evening he dawdled, or put his hands into his pockets and looked out of the window, whistling in a low key, while he idly watched the passers-by or day-dreamed ; or he sat still and looked into the fire, and

speculated on the future. He had made up his mind to become rich by his own exertions, and he had in favour of his becoming at any rate well-off, youth, perseverance, fair ability, and the authority of the poet—Sir Philip Sidney, was it not?—who asserts that “he who aims at the sun is sure to hit higher than a bush.”

There was one thing Polly liked him for almost immediately; when the shyness had worn off, he was very communicative. He told her everything she wanted to know about himself; indeed, he rather liked the subject, and would have given her his whole history, from his christening onwards, if she had cared to listen to it. Nothing pleases a woman better than asking questions and having them fully answered; it fosters two of her foibles at once, curiosity and vanity.

“Do you know,” said she, at the end of his first month’s residence in her father’s house, “I thought you had a particular objection to me the first evening you came, for you hardly spoke to me, and never once looked at me!” and she shook her head a little disdainfully at the very remembrance.

“I watched you all the time,” he said.

“You did!” she exclaimed; “why, how could you? for you even kept your head turned the other way.”

“I saw you in the looking-glass. You had the same bit of ribbon in your hair, I think, as you have to-night; it was red at all events.”

“Why, I thought you never noticed it.”

“You did think about it, then?”

“Oh, no,” trying to look very careless and unconcerned; “only, you know, I fancied—at least—well, you know, red is a bright colour, so I thought you might have thought it a little gaudy.” Polly was getting confused over her first essay in coquetry.

“I see,” he answered. “Miss Dawson,” he said presently, “Mr. Dawson told me I could always come down of an evening; could I not have tea with you? A man never knows how to handle a teapot.”

“I don’t know,” she answered. It would involve

an extra spoonful of tea, she thought, and an extra spoonful of anything in that establishment meant an extra scolding from the master, who was very much the master thereof. "Perhaps you had better ask my father; he is in his study."

"What a dreadful fuss!" he thought; "perhaps, though, the father is very strict in these matters. Some fathers fancy every man has a design on the affections of their daughters; I am sure he need not be afraid of *me*."

He was not angry at this solution of the matter; a man never is when he fancies himself credited with the amount of fascination necessary to render a design on a woman's affections practicable. Vanity is a great tyrant over us all, but it has a pleasant habit sometimes of whispering very pretty nothings of which we do not see the nothingness.

"Certainly," the lawyer said, in answer to his question; "indeed, you need scarcely enter your drawing-room of an evening unless you like: we are glad to have you with us;" and he thought quickly of the wear and tear of furniture and stair-carpets, and the item of gas which would be saved. "Only we must enter into some trifling arrangement of the matter," he continued, in his softest tone, "you know, I am sure that the interest my dear, kind brother wished me to take in you——"

"Believe he's going to make a speech," Robert Welch thought.

"To take in you," repeated the lawyer, looking as mild as a lamb nature had forgotten to develope into a sheep, "is no task; indeed, as I have no grown-up sons of my own, I was delighted when he asked me to look after your welfare during your stay in London, and it was this feeling which induced me to suggest your residing with us. With regard to the tea of an evening, by all means join our table; we will, as I think it right every young man should have the principle of independence thoroughly instilled into him, come to some slight understanding concerning it, and then we will consider the matter settled."

"All right, Mr. Dawson."

"It is a rule of my life, my dear Welch," he added, getting in his most gracious temper as he received the young man's ready acquiescence to his proposal, "to have every transaction, however slight, well defined. There is nothing like having a most perfect understanding both with yourself and other people."

"Quite right, Mr. Dawson, quite right, I am sure," Robert Welch answered. "But I hope you won't go on everlasting preaching me these yarns," he thought, "or I shall get tired of it."

"Miss Polly," he said, as he returned to the dining-room, "I am at your mercy of an evening in future."

"I am so glad," she said.

"Why are you glad? I thought perhaps you would not like the trouble."

"I forgot that," she answered; "I only said I was glad out of politeness. I am very sorry."

"I am very glad, but I do not say so out of politeness."

"Then *why* are you glad? There is your own question back for you to answer."

"There is no occasion for me to answer it; you know already."

CHAPTER IV.

POLLY HAS A TALK WITH HER FATHER.



ENRY," Mrs. Dawson said one evening to her husband, as Jack coughed again and again, "now Mr. Welch is here, could you not afford to give Jack a few more nourishing things? His appetite is very bad." Robert Welch of course was absent.

"He's growing," the lawyer said, looking up uneasily; "and you mustn't be dainty, Jack; I couldn't encourage that."

"No," answered the boy wearily, taking up a book, and going over to a footstool in a corner near the fire, while Polly leant over his shoulder to look at the pictures.

"I am sure he is not dainty," Mrs. Dawson answered. "But we never have nice things like other people; I often long for things myself and dare not buy them, because I know you would say it was extravagant. I am sure we never have things like other people—not food, or clothes, or anything else. Why, I am even ashamed to go to church on Sundays, I am so shabby." Mrs. Dawson thought she might as well put in a word about the clothes while she was about it.

"My love," said the lawyer, with meek but dignified horror, "people should not go to church to show off their fine clothes!"

"But one does like to look nice. I am sure when we were all at home at Benthwaite," Mrs. Dawson went on in a pleading tone, taking no notice of the little impatient gesture her husband made when the inevitable Benthwaite was brought into comparison again, "we

used to look so nice on Sundays; there were not three prettier dressed girls in the whole church, or better looking, though I say it." She turned her head away, and said the last words gently but almost defiantly.

"No, my love, I am sure there were not," he responded in blandest tones. "You never needed fine dress to set you off, simplicity suited you so well, especially in church, especially in church," he repeated. "I should indeed be grieved if you thought of worldly things there."

"It's much better than fairy stories, isn't it?" came Polly's voice from beside the footstool; "you don't even care for 'Beauty and the Beast' now, do you, Jack?"

"No," he answered, "not a bit; but I say, Polly, where did the world go to, when Christian got to the shining city?"

"Why, it didn't go anywhere," answered Polly, opening her eyes as if she fancied Jack thought the world a trifle to be put into one's pocket. "Don't you understand? He travelled away from it, and left it far behind, that is what I think; and the dark water and the Valley of the Shadow of Death came between it and the shining city."

The lawyer dropped his meek horror, and Mrs. Dawson forgot her pitiful complaining as they both listened almost mechanically while their children discussed life's great shadow—Death.

"But where is the shining city?" he asked.

"I don't know," his sister said, "but it is a long way off—beyond the moon and stars, and far beyond the world."

"Polly," and he looked up, and coughed again that hacking cough, "how nice it must be there; shouldn't you like to leave the world behind, and the moon, and the stars, and everything, and travel to it?"

"I don't know; I think I like being here very well." Polly had a strong, though as yet undeveloped, liking for this wicked world, and all its pomps and vanities.

"Oh ! I should though ; I don't care about this place much. How do you get there, Polly ?"

She sat gravely silent for a moment or two considering that question, which the greatest and wisest before her have been unable to answer. Then presently she stooped, and looked wonderingly, almost fearful, at the boy's delicate face and clear blue eyes, and answered softly, "That is God's teaching, and that is why we read the Bible, so that we may learn."

"Jack," his mother said, "you shouldn't talk about those sort of things, it makes one feel so nervous. I want to go up-stairs, and it's eight o'clock, so you had better wish your father good night, and come to bed ; I can't bear going up-stairs in the dark."

He rose, kissed his sister, and went to his father. "Good night, father."

"Good night—good night, my boy ;" and he took the two bony, thin hands in his. "You must take care of yourself, and not catch cold, nor get into a draught, and then, when you grow up, we'll make a rich man of you."

"He wants change of air," Mrs. Dawson said ; "the seaside would do him a world of good, and he and I could go very cheaply together—we shouldn't want much." She was childishly, almost amusingly selfish in some things. She would do others any good or give them pleasure, yet she liked to be personally concerned in the good or the pleasure. "Now, if we went to Margate for a week, for instance. All the doctors say ——"

"Too bleak, much too bleak at this time of year," his father answered, shaking his head ; "we must wait till the summer, and see what that does for him. Keep him warm, that is the best thing for him. Good night, my boy ;" then Jack left the room with his mother. Mr. Dawson turned to his papers, and Polly sat on the footstool looking blankly into the fire.

It would be difficult to say exactly of what the father was thinking. Perhaps no clearly-defined

thoughts passed through his brain, but there seemed to come to him a vague knowledge and dread foreboding of he scarcely knew what ; a something that whispered to him that his entire happiness was not comprehended in the depth and breadth of his purse, and a dim wondering, for what use and to what end he was toiling, and grasping, and hoarding. And as he wondered, insensibly there rose to his mind's eye the thin, patient face of his son. Ah, yes, it was for him, he thought : there was no selfishness, no love of lucre for its own intrinsic value, no hoarding and stinting because his nature was mean and miserly, no pandering to an almost vicious feeling of triumph in the knowledge that his gains were larger, and increased quicker than other people's, though the knowledge was gained at the expense of the health and comfort of his wife and children ; and he was justified in continuing in the course he had pursued so long. So he deceived himself again and again, and quieted his conscience ; it troubled him little as a rule, but now and then it was rather tiresome. His was not perhaps a wholly bad nature, but it was not a good one. Given the temptation, and if he had the courage, he would do any wrong ; but given the opportunity, he had not right feeling enough, nor energy, nor incentive of any kind to do a great and good action, unless he individually gained considerably by it. Then he would have done it, and his honour and glory would have been the talk of all who knew him, for hiding his light under a bushel was not one of his failings, though, truth to tell, in the matter of merit, he had seldom any light to hide. Still, the good that lurks, with few exceptions, in all natures, came out from its hiding-place that evening, as he sat thinking of his gains and of Jack. If Jack grew worse, a more dread contingency he refused even to consider, and if the boy's delicacy were not merely the result of growing so quickly, and the cold and damp, and anything else that suggested itself to his imagination,—but then he could not afford to spend money on luxuries ; besides, it was absurd to humour a boy of Jack's age. So he

deceived himself, and unconsciously weighed in a mental scale his love for his boy against his love for his money.

"Father," he heard a girl's voice say softly, at his side, "if we do not take care of Jack he will die—he will, indeed."

He started from his reverie, and almost shudderingly pushed her away, for it flashed through his mind that unwittingly their thoughts had been travelling, only "with a difference," in the same groove. He was unused to evidences of affection or caresses from his children, and Polly's manner, from its very kindness, surprised—almost frightened, him. She was kneeling at his side looking up tearfully into his face. She had been thinking, as she sat blankly watching the fire, of how lonely to her would be the world he left behind, if Jack travelled home to that shining city of which they had been talking. The boy was perhaps more to her even than was her mother, whose nature was too shallow and childish to inspire a degree of affection beyond that which the mere relationship of mother and child naturally involves. And after the thought of what his loss would be to her, came the question of what it would be to her father, for she knew instinctively that he cared for the boy, and that up to a certain point his affection—till it clashed with his stronger one for money—would, in dread necessity or fear, force him to do much that, for another human being, he would not dream of attempting.

"Father," she said again, "unless we take great care of Jack he will die; I am sure he will."

"Oh, no—no," he said, crossly shaking her off in fright rather than anger. "He is growing, it's nothing else, and you must keep him warm; and perhaps when it is rainy it would be as well not to let him go to Mr. Dale's; it only makes him wet and gives him cold, and he can study at home, a day's loss will not matter."

Then Polly brushed her tears away, and answered earnestly, "Father, it is not perhaps my place to speak to you about it, but you are weighing your money

against Jack's life. He is delicate naturally, and he is getting ill, and he wants nourishment and fresh air and all manner of things—good advice and change of scene; and it seems to me that without them he will pine and fret, and gradually die. It is only a necessity makes me speak so to you, father, but I am sure unless you do something for him he will die."

"Nonsense!" he said, "he's growing, I tell you; I would do anything for him, but I can't encourage all your idle fancies. Change of air at this time of year would only do him more harm than good; and as for doctors, I never believe in them. He has enough to eat, hasn't he, you don't mean to say that I starve you, do you, Polly?" he added, the last words being spoken in an almost appealing tone.

"No, father," Polly answered, unflinchingly, "I don't mean to say that you starve us; but I do mean to say you grudge us the comforts, and only give us the necessaries of life, and Jack cannot live on them. You do not think," she continued, "how much you deny us, you do not, indeed. I know you are not a poor man, papa; how rich you may be, I have not an idea; but I do know that we often long for those things as a luxury, which other people have as a matter of course. Why, even the servants we have had have complained of our fare; and my mother looks in the shops at the nice things, as she calls them, when we go for a walk, and quite frets because she cannot get them. And you don't know," she continued, poutingly, "how I often long for bows and ribbons, and many pretty things, which I see other girls wear, but never have myself. I don't know what Mr. Welch thinks of me, I am sure," and she gave a sidelong look in the glass. "That does not matter," she went on; "but unless you take Jack in hand he will die. Oh! he will, indeed—I am sure he will die!" and her hands were clasped now, and the tears rolling down her cheeks.

"My dear girl," he answered, startled by her manner, and getting alarmed, "I did not suppose he was

so bad. I will have him seen to at once, though, you know, I don't believe in doctors." He rose and walked up and down the room quickly, feeling that his life was more bound up in Jack's than he had imagined. "We must take care of him. I am sure I would not deny him, or any of you, anything in reason. Order what you like, Polly, if it will make him well; and as for you—here, shall I give you half-a-crown to buy yourself a ribbon? will you say I am not stingy then?"

"Give me half-a-crown!" she was quite startled; in the whole course of her life she could not remember her father offering to give her such a sum. It seemed like a little fortune suddenly laid at her feet by the moon. "Give me half-a-crown—oh!" that was all she could say, for her bewilderment swallowed up all other words.

He felt in his pocket and drew out a handful of silver, then hastily put it back again, and fumbled among the coins, half repenting of his rash generosity. At last he found a two-shilling piece, and remembered that it looked nearly as well, and was worth sixpence less.

"Here," he said, "I can't find one, but this will buy you a ribbon."

"Thank you, papa," she answered gratefully; but thinking a little regretfully of the extra quantity of ribbon the odd sixpence would have bought. "I am sure he was a stingy soul," she said to herself, "who first thought of two-shilling pieces; there would have been so many more half-crowns given away if they had never been invented."

"And Polly," the lawyer went on nervously, "perhaps if you got Jack some strong beef-tea and some cod-liver oil, there's nothing like cod-liver oil for delicate people, it would be as well. If he does not get better soon I will take him to a doctor; but he's only growing; he's only growing." The last words were said to himself rather than to Polly. Then for a moment the thought crossed his mind that it might be a good thing to take

Jack from Mr. Dale's, and send him to a country boarding-school for a while, or a school at some bracing seaside place, where pure air and change of scene would be had as a matter of course, and in a certain sense for nothing. But the idea was dismissed from his mind in a moment. To come home and not see Jack's pale face at the meagre tea-table! It would take the one pleasure he had out of his days. He did not know it was a pleasure, he only thought of his son's absence with a sense of uneasiness he would not countenance; and yet for the sake of a little money, a little slackening of the rein he was always tightening more and more, he went on risking the life that was so precious to him.

"Good night, mother dear," Jack said, as he lay in his little bed, and put up his white face to be kissed. "Good night, mother dear. I am so tired; wouldn't it be nice if one never felt tired?"

"Yes, wouldn't it," his mother answered; "wouldn't it be nice to be rich, and have as many cabs and omnibuses as one liked?"

"I don't know; I don't think I should care about cabs and omnibuses, but I should like never to feel tired any more. I should like to get into a strange country, I think, and go on and on until at last I got to a wonderful city like Christian did."

"But Christian was dead when he got to the shining city, Jack; you don't want to die?"

"No, mother, but I would like to get there—wouldn't you? Only think of all we'd do!"

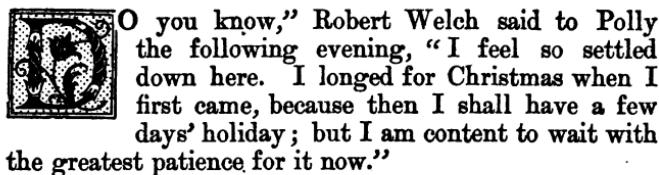
"But you don't want to die, Jack?" the same dread fastening on the mother's heart up-stairs that was staring the father in the face below. "You don't want to go away, and leave me and Polly;" and hardly knowing why, she burst into tears and sobbed like a child. Then he put his arms tightly round her neck, and clung to her and kissed her again and again.

"Oh no, mamma, dear, dear mamma! I didn't mean that; I only thought I'd like never to be tired and more." And when his mother had gone down-stairs Jack

lay awake a long time thinking of the strange city towards which his thoughts had been turning all that evening, and before he went to sleep he put his two hands together and prayed, "Oh, Lord, make me good, and some day take me home to the shining city, me, and mother, and Polly—and father." His little heart smote him for forgetting his father. "And make us all good, and never tired any more."

CHAPTER V.

POLLY AND ROBERT.



O you know," Robert Welch said to Polly the following evening, "I feel so settled down here. I longed for Christmas when I first came, because then I shall have a few days' holiday; but I am content to wait with the greatest patience for it now."

"Is it quite in the country where you live?" asked Polly, with the idea that every place which was not London must be rural, with moss on the pathways and trees at the street corners.

"Oh, no! quite crowded with shops, like London."

"Oh! then you never have nice things—cream, and so on. I think country living is so nice," Mrs. Dawson said, looking up from her book. Mrs. Dawson was speculative, and had visions of Robert Welch returning from his holidays laden with butter and new-laid eggs, hares and rabbits, partridges and pheasants, and home-made pork pies.

"No," he said; "but we have a garden, for our house is a little way from the busy part, and I'll bring you some lovely flowers in the summer, and lavender to scent your linen."

"Will you?" she said delightedly—trifles always pleased her. "Oh, I am so fond of flowers!" and she already saw in her mind's eye Robert Welch coming back with a big nosegay, tied up with string and wrapped round with newspaper, and a great bunch of lavender gracefully bowing out of his side pocket. "I forgot to ask you, Mr. Welch, if you have any books with you; I do so want a new story to read."

"I don't read stories, Mrs. Dawson," he answered. "They are all alike, and it is only waste of time."

"I like poetry, don't you?" said Polly.

"No, I don't like poetry either; I can't understand it somehow. I don't care for books at all," he added, "and I never read any if I can help it."

"Oh!" and Polly opened her eyes curiously. She had a habit of using that monosyllabic ejaculation when in doubt of the exact reply expected from her, and she thought disappointedly to herself, "He can't be very clever if he dislikes books, and I should think he isn't very romantic if he doesn't care for poetry."

So Robert Welch erected his first tiny stumbling-block on the road to Polly's heart—a road which, before long, he would have given much to travel. He fell in love with her of course. Before the second month of his residence at Kensington was over he bowed down and worshipped her. He had been brought up by an uncle and aunt, who had had no children of their own for him to associate with, and he had no brothers or sisters. His life had been more lonely than Polly's till he entered her family circle, and all the love his warm, impulsive, generous nature had to give, was slumbering undisturbed within his heart. He did not tell her, but she soon found out, as a woman will, her power over him—a power she did not even understand; and to him those first weeks and months were a long and happy day-dream. He left the house with a light heart in the morning; he did his work with all his might; and in the evening, rejoicing that his day's work was done, impatiently took his way back to the dingy tea-table at which his goddess presided. A man seldom gives himself up to a blind passion of this kind, save when he is very young, and for the *first* woman who finds an entrance into his heart; when he does, it is perhaps more absorbing and unselfish and complete even than a woman's love: so it was with Robert Welch.

And Polly? Well, she did not know what were the love she had won, and the homage she accepted as her

natural right. She was a woman who liked attention, and took it simply as her due, though, until Robert Welch appeared, there had been no one to pay it to her. Still, she knew instinctively it would come, and she unconsciously expected; nay, almost exacted it. She wore her best ribbons for him; she adorned herself in all the thousand ways a woman can for a man who never understands details, so long as the whole is pleasing to his eye; she sang her favourite songs for him in her sweetest voice, and looked up at him for the admiration he was only too ready to give; she waited for his coming of an evening with her hair smoothed, and wore a pleased smile upon her face when he appeared. Yet her eyes never turned anxiously to the clock if he chanced to be a little late, and her heart never throbbed one second quicker when she heard his step. She accepted his exaggerated compliments, and put the flower he sometimes brought her home, in her dress, or in her hair, but she never lingered in thought over his pretty speeches, and the flower was never taken tenderly from its resting-place, and looked at with a smile or a blush, and shyly hidden away. The pretty speeches were forgotten, and the flower thrown carelessly on one side when its beauty faded.

No, she did not fall in love with him, though she had a little sentimental feeling for him, as a woman usually has for the man who first lays siege to her heart, and she thought it pleasant to have some one to talk to, some one who would gladly listen to the music of her voice without troubling himself to comprehend its theme, gravely watching her face, when she felt in the humour to chatter about a thousand things she did not understand, and did not care to gain understanding of. There was something gratifying, too, to the girl whose life had been so lonely, who had had no play-fellows or school-girl friendships, no one before to single her out from the common rank and file of human beings, to find herself suddenly the chief consideration of some one's life. A woman's nature is so ivyish, that she must cling

to something, no matter whether it is father or mother, or lover or husband ; she must have some one to live within her air-castles, some one to whom she mentally sends her most secret thoughts home to roost. So it was with Polly. She had no intention of seriously trying to win Robert Welch's love, or of trifling with him in any way, only she was a woman, and instinctively played off those little airs and graces which are so natural to a pretty one, and she was flattered and pleased, and found it pleasant to be liked and appreciated ; to have some one who would neither snub nor slight nor ignore her ; some one to think of her, and for her ; to listen to her troubles and minister to her pleasures and her vanity ; to admire her when at her best, and sympathise with her when she was tired or desponding—that was all. She was no heartless coquette ; she knew Robert Welch liked and admired her ; it simply never occurred to her that he did more, and if it had she would have been but little disturbed. Love was a mystery she was as yet unable to understand.

CHAPTER VI.

MRS. DAWSON RECEIVES VISITORS.

 Y dear Mary," said Mr. Dawson one morning, in his blandest tone, when, according to his usual custom, he minutely examined the monthly accounts of the household expenditure, "there is surely some mistake here; your expenses are most extravagant, and quite beyond my means."

"I really don't see how," his wife answered pettishly, anxious not to enter upon a subject to which she had a particular objection.

"I must consult Polly, if you do not know; my dear," he answered softly; "but it is usually considered the business of the mistress of the house to look after these things."

"So I do, and I am sure I am as careful as possible," she answered angrily. Mrs. Dawson could never calmly discuss any subject in which there was a chance of any blame attaching to herself. "I spend as little as I can; you may ask Mrs. Albury, or any one else, if it is possible to manage on less than I do."

"Mrs. Albury has nothing to do with this matter, and it is no use losing your temper, my dear. If I cannot have these matters seen into properly, I must take the reins into my own hands."

"I am sure the reins and everything else are in your hands already. You must ask Polly about the stupid accounts; I know nothing about them;" and she left the room, banging the door after her.

Mrs. Dawson always tried to make a scene on the smallest provocation, though her husband's meanness

was aggravating enough, and with the soft answer that turns away wrath she had but the slightest possible acquaintance.

"Go down to your father, Polly," she said to her daughter; "he's making the usual fuss about the house-keeping. I'll write and ask your Aunt Maria if your grandfather ever did such a thing, and I'll tell Mr. Welch this evening, and ask him if his uncle ever makes such a to-do about nothing."

"Hush! mamma, dear," Polly answered soothingly; "you shouldn't be so easily vexed about a trifle. I can soon explain it all."

Then Polly left her mother preparing to damp her own rage with a shower of tears, and went to her father.

"Papa," she said, "the books are a very little in excess on account of the things you told me I might get for Jack."

"I know—I know," he answered; "but he is much better now; they have done him good, and can be discontinued. I would have you remember through life, Polly, nothing is worse than excess in anything."

"But it is not excess with Jack, I assure you; you should hear him cough sometimes, and see how bright his eyes look."

"Polly," said her father, resolutely keeping shut the door of his heart, which had begun to creak on its hinges at the mention of his son's name, "you will coddle that boy up with your old woman ways till a puff of wind will kill him. I won't have it, and that's enough."

Then Mr. Dawson took his hat, and left the house. He dropped his suavity when occasion absolutely required it.

"I told you so," Mrs. Dawson said in the afternoon. "I shan't speak to him again to-day." Mrs. Dawson always sulked like a child after a quarrel. "And I shall tell Mr. Welch of the way in which your father has treated me," she continued indignantly; "and I am sure if I were you, Polly, I'd get Mr. Welch to marry me. You'd be much better off than you are at home,

half-starved and grudged every penny piece expended upon you."

"Get Mr. Welch to marry me!" Polly exclaimed, her eyes opening and her cheeks flushing at the suggestion and the way it was put. *Get him to marry her!* as if whoever had the happiness of some day paying her bills, and devoting his life to her service, must not go down on his knees and entreat for the honour. "Really, mamma," she said, "you speak as if it would be a favour to marry me, instead of——" and she pouted and stopped.

"Well, you are not such a catch," her mother answered candidly. "Why, I was married when I was a little older than you are; and your father had asked me to ~~run~~ away with him before I was your age; and I heard that old Mr. Brandford of the Laurels said he didn't wonder at it either. No one ever tried to run away with you."

"No," said Polly, rather regretfully, "no one ever did."

"And I remember when your aunt Annie married Dr. Phillips, poor George Browne nearly broke his heart about it. Why, no one ever broke his heart for you in your life." Her mother was getting a little contemptuous.

"No," said Polly in the same rather regretful tone, "no one; I only wish some one would. I should feel so deliciously consequential afterwards."

"Then, you see," concluded Mrs. Dawson, triumphantly, "you needn't give yourself such airs about Robert Welch. I like him; he's so attentive to me, and he's going to bring me back some flowers and lavender in the summer-time—he said so. Now I shall go and lie down;" and she departed, as was her custom, to take an afternoon nap, and Polly sat down in the dining-room easy-chair. She liked that easy-chair. It was large, and roomy, and shabby, and comfortable, and there was no teasing antimacassar thrown over its back, to tumble over her head if she ventured to lean back, or to

tickle her eyes and nose if the worn, rubbed leather arms wooed her to a doze. It was a very dingy house altogether, a house in which there were many shadows and few lights, still Polly had a liking for it, and she was very fond of that cosy old chair, and she nestled down in it with a feeling of relief when her mother had left the room, and proceeded to think over the aspect of affairs generally.

She thought of Jack first, with his delicate face and hacking cough, and then of her father and mother. She was fond of them; every girl with a pure affectionate nature loves her parents as a matter of course, but Polly, perhaps, loved hers as a matter of course only. Yes, she loved her mother; and she was so used to her little fits of temper and vanity, which were more than balanced by the unselfish way in which she was always ready to constitute herself a sacrifice to any one else's convenience, or the generous way in which she would spend her last penny on some addition to Polly's wardrobe, that her very faults strengthened her daughter's affection for her. And then she thought of Robert Welch. It was nearly three months now since he first came (it only wanted ten days to Christmas), and those three months had but slightly altered her feelings towards him. She liked him very much, but she only *liked* him; she had grown used to him, and he amused her, though he did not interest her—that was all. Every lock has its own particular key, and the one which opened the door of her heart Robert Welch did not as yet possess. She wondered at herself for not caring more about him.

“Robert,” she had soon learnt to call him by his Christian name, “is very kind and good-natured,” she thought; “but I suppose one never does get really desperate now-a-days excepting in books. I don’t think I am very affectionate either. I love my mother and Jack, but I don’t care every much for any one else. I like Robert, but I am certain I shouldn’t cry my eyes out if I never saw him again.”

The fact is, a woman is just like a sunflower. Even as that flower turns its face to the sun, so a woman must look up to a man thoroughly to love him ; and if he is not worthy of this in himself, he must possess attributes which will admit of her idealising him into anything she pleases. Half the love in the world is laid down at the shrine of ideality, especially by women ; they create an idea, and fancy it a human being. But Robert Welch was not good material for an idea. An ideal never wore a woollen comforter round his neck—Polly had not forgiven that crime yet—or sat in a merchant's office all day, and did sums, and whistled of an evening as he did, save when he looked at Polly ; neither was Robert clever, nor wonderful enough in any way for her to love him without the idealism which absolutely refused to glorify him. She never thought of asking his opinion on anything she was doubtful about, still less of taking it. She did not even care for his admiration ; it was too lavish, too unfailing, too indiscriminate to be worth striving to gain. She thirsted for praise she had honestly to earn, and eyes whose approving glances she would value, because they were not blind to her faults.

She sighed a little, for she felt there was a possibility of her being Robert Welch's wife (though as yet he had not asked her), and she felt too that the love she had read of in the romantic stories her mother delighted in, might possibly wake in her own heart, though probably it would slumber there for ever. She liked Robert Welch, but she shouldn't care if he married some one else to-morrow ; at least, she didn't think she should, though she didn't much relish the idea of his doing so. No woman ever did feel herself securely seated on the throne of a man's heart, and enjoy the idea of coming down-stairs again. She is very sorry if she cannot return the compliment and give him an equally elevated position in her heart, she is more sorry still if he pines, and grieves, and strives with all his might to gain what he cannot win. Yes, she is very sorry for him indeed, but—she rather likes it.

Then Polly found herself listening mechanically to the sound of wheels, which came nearer and nearer, and then stopped; still she did not move. Carriages did not usually stop at their door, and in carts she took no interest. Suddenly she was startled by the sound of a loud double knock. "Whoever can it be!" she exclaimed, as leaving her chair with a bound she hid herself behind the curtain and looked out of the window. "Well, I declare, it's those horrid Alburys come in a brougham; wonder if they've suddenly set one up, or hired it. Won't mamma be vexed, if it's their own!" She opened the dining-room door gently, told the servant in a stage whisper to show them into the drawing-room, and went to rouse her mother.

"What a bother, to be sure!" Mrs. Dawson said; "give me my crimson shawl, I'll wrap it round me and say I have a cold, then they won't see my shabby dress. You come down too, Polly; I never know what to talk about, myself. I wonder what that Miss Albury came with her mother for. I wish to goodness people would keep their distance." Then Mrs. Dawson, with a clean pocket-handkerchief in her hand and a set smile on her face, went into the drawing-room and told her visitors how pleased she was to see them, it was quite an age since they had been to see her, she really had wondered what had become of them.

"We have been coming a great many days, but really one gets so much to do in London. I dare say you find that, Mrs. Dawson," Mrs. Albury said.

"Oh, yes," Mrs. Dawson answered rather absently, thinking it was like that Margaret Albury's impudence to go on looking at the things around her, as if she heartily despised them all.

"What with winter exhibitions, you know—do you care for them, Mrs. Dawson?"

"Oh, I never go to them," in a slightly offended tone. "I don't care for pictures," with a sudden burst of spitefulness concealed by a little laugh. Then Polly entered, obviously with her hair just smoothed, and her

hands still pinky from the effects of very recent soap and water. Margaret Albury rose as she entered, and ceased taking a mental survey of the room. She rather admired Polly.

"Did not you come from the north of England, Mrs. Dawson?" Mrs. Albury asked. "I think I have heard you say so."

"Yes, my poor father was the clergyman of Benthwaite for a great many years." Mrs. Dawson always diplomatically used the word "clergyman," and so veiled the fact that the curate had possessed neither interest nor eloquence to obtain a living.

"We have had a visitor from that part of the world lately—a Mr. Brandford; do you know him?"

"Oh, dear me! yes, I used to know the family well, and went to their parties before—like a great many other foolish young people—Mr. Dawson and I made a runaway match of it;" and she looked at her daughter, which that young lady thought rather hard, for she had not the slightest chance of making a runaway or any other match. "Which Brandford is it? there are two families of them. The older branch is the poorer one, and only consists now of Mrs. Brandford and her son, the old gentleman died last year."

"Ah, then it is the son who is our visitor—Mr. Richard Brandford of the Laurels."

"Then there are the Brandfords of the Hollow. They are the younger branch, but much richer, I believe, for Mr. Felix Brandford—he must be an old gentleman too now, though he was some years younger than his brother at the Laurels—was a clever barrister, a Q.C., and all sorts of things."

"I see you know all about them," Mrs. Albury remarked, a shade vexed.

"Well, yes, that is a natural consequence of the position my father held in Benthwaite. How did you know young Brandford?"

"Very easily. He went to the office on some business with your husband, and became friendly with mine,

who asked him home to dine and see his books. Mr. Albury is proud of his library, you know, and Mr. Brandford is quite a bookworm.

"Dear me! I shouldn't have thought it;" and she added mentally, "How stupid of Henry not to have invited him here; he would have liked us better than those stuck-up Alburys."

"You must dine with us one day, Mrs. Dawson, and meet him. He has gone to the North now, but returns to town immediately after Christmas." She wanted to provoke Mrs. Dawson, by exhibiting her intimacy with one of those people whom she had held in life-long reverence. "I will ask you and Mr. Dawson, and your daughter, if she will come, when he returns. I think we must be going. Have you seen my brougham, Mrs. Dawson? I have just coaxed my husband into establishing it. You should do the same by yours."

"Well, really I don't care about it," Mrs. Dawson answered, trying to look unconcerned, but bursting with jealousy, and thinking that trying to coax Mr. Dawson to spend any money he could possibly help, when he had once earned it, would be very much like trying to coax a cat to let a fine fat mouse just caught trot back to its hole.

"Perhaps you have not been used to one. You see papa always kept one for us at home, and I have missed it so much during my married life."

"Yes, that is the best of the medical profession; even a surgeon can afford his brougham. My sister, Mrs. Phillips—her husband is a doctor—remarked to me only in her last letter what a comfort she found it." And Mrs. Dawson looked straight into her visitor's face, feeling that she had paid back the vulgar little bit of brag with interest.

"The idea of their asking Mr. Brandford there," Mrs. Dawson said, when she had watched the brougham she did not care about quite out of sight. "They only invite us to dinner to show off, I know that; but I'll let them see that we were somebodies at Benthwaite, for

Richard Brandford is sure to remember me." Then she considered that it was necessary to propitiate her husband, in order to keep him good-humoured, so that he might not invent an excuse to prevent their dining at the Alburys', which he would be sure to do, if he thought it likely to cost anything.

"That Miss Albury is very plain," she said, continuing her remarks, "she's so shallow, and she's six-and-twenty if she's a day. Polly, mind you make yourself look nice if you go there to dine. Richard Brandford may fall in love with you, who knows? I think you are very like what I used to be; I really should not be surprised if he's struck with you."

"Oh, mamma dear, how can you talk such nonsense, you fancy every one is going to be 'struck' with me. I don't suppose Mr. Brandford will even look at me;" feeling tolerably certain all the time that he would look at her. Polly was a vain little minx—most pretty girls are, only some are clever enough to cloak their vanity. She was not conceited, mind; there is a great deal of difference between the two: a conceited woman is detestable; a vain one only natural.

"Fall in love with me!" she said to herself that evening, as she pondered over her mother's words, "I am quite sure he won't."

CHAPTER VII.

BEFORE THE DAWN.



R. AND MRS. DAWSON were sitting together in the back dining-room (the study) at Kensington. Mrs. Dawson had told Robert Welch in strict confidence that morning how completely Mr. Dawson bowed down to Mammon, and how he seemed to desire that they should emulate the condition of the proverbial skeleton which dwells in every house, and become skeletons likewise. She had also told him that her father had been for many years clergyman of Benthwaite, and that she and Mr. Dawson had made a runaway match of it. Having informed him of these facts—facts which, by the way, she had mentioned before to divers of her acquaintance—she felt in better humour than usual with her spouse, and wrapping a shawl round her, had taken the third volume of a most dismal love story into his study, and sitting down there kept him company while he worked. He was a little uneasy about something, as she saw by his way of looking absently over his papers instead of attentively down at them, and once or twice he put his hand hesitatingly into his breastpocket, and drew it decidedly out again. Mrs. Dawson, however, knew that by asking questions she would hear nothing. She therefore wisely held her peace.

In the front room Jack was practising the chromatic scale in a manner which had a decided tendency to set one's teeth on an edge. Polly was writing an elaborate Christmas letter (it only wanted three days to Christmas) to her Aunt Maria, the spinster at

Benthwaite, and Robert Welch was looking at her. He was going to Liverpool in the morning to spend his holiday, and strange to say he was not at all rejoiced thereat. He could have gone that evening if he liked, but he was so loth to tear himself away from the abode of shabbiness and—Polly, that he had invented an excuse to his relations, and was going by a very early train in the morning. He was rather a favourite with his employers, both on account of Frederic Dawson's recommendation and his own perseverance, and it was an understood thing that eventually he would pass on to their chief office at Liverpool; therefore as an act of kindness, as well as of convenience to himself, one of the partners had arranged that after the Christmas holidays he should remain in Liverpool for a few weeks, exchanging duty with his son, who occupied a like situation to Robert Welch, by which arrangement each of the young men would get a longer time with his respective friends. This protracted absence it grieved Robert Welch to think of, with the whole of it before him, and he sat watching Polly, feeling he would gladly give up his holiday altogether and do three times the work, if he might only stay in London.

"Jack," she said, as she finished her letter, "it is time for you to go to Mr. Dale's." Jack was going to assist at a rehearsal of the Christmas Day church music.

"You had better pull up the collar of your great coat," Robert Welch said; "it's uncommonly cold."

"I haven't one," he answered truthfully.

"Haven't one! Mine would not fit you either. Here, wait a minute, and I'll get you something," and he ran up-stairs.

"Jack had better not go," his father called from the next room; "I don't see what he gains by it."

"Oh, father!" exclaimed Jack.

"Here, wrap this round him," said Robert Welch, as he brought down the woollen comforter which had so

offended Polly ; " or stay, I will," as Mr. Dawson called to his daughter.

" Polly," the lawyer said, " that boy's cough is dreadful."

" Indeed it is—dreadful!" and she clasped her hands.

" Wrap him up well, if he *will* go to-night," he said, evidently speaking with an effort, " and in the morning get him ready to go out with me, and I will buy him a great coat."

" Oh!" and she rushed away, to the lawyer's astonishment. " Jack!" she called to her brother, who was on the point of banging the door after himself, " you are to get up early in the morning," and she pulled his ears gently in her delight, " and papa will take you out and buy you a new great coat ; and I am so glad, darling!" She came to a climax with a kiss, and bundled him out as happy as a king. " Thank you, very much, dear papa," she said, going back to her paternal relative.

" My dear child," said the lawyer, half-closing his eyes, and looking like a converted fox, " I am glad you see how anxious I always am to promote the happiness and comfort of my children. So you'll be as careful as you can, won't you, Polly?"

" Yes, papa," and she went back to the front room, and sat down and looked into the fire. " Robert," she said presently, " it was thoughtful of you to get that comforter for Jack. That comforter did so offend me, too, the first night you came ; I thought it so ugly."

" Did you? I don't think you liked me the first time you saw me."

" No, I didn't."

" But you like me better now?"

" Oh, yes, a great deal."

" Are you sure?"

" Mr. Welch!" came the voice of the lawyer from the inner room. " I called you," he said, as the young man entered, " to give you this letter from my brother.

It came enclosed in one to me ; " he drew it slowly, almost reluctantly, out of his breast-pocket, and he looked as if he should like to see it opened.

" Thank you," Robert said, wondering vaguely why Mr. Dawson had not given it to him when he first came home, instead of keeping it for some two or three hours in his pocket; but it was only just a passing thought. " Mr. Dawson," he said suddenly turning back as he was leaving the room, " did I ever show you my watch? Your brother gave it to me when I was twenty-one. He has been a very kind friend to me."

" Yes—yes, it is very nice," he said hurriedly ; " let me know if there is anything to interest me in my brother's letter." — And he turned to his papers. " I wonder what Fred says to him," he thought. " I don't like his giving him a watch ; waste of money on one who doesn't belong to him. I must look after Robert Welch, or he will try and take what should be Jack's place in my brother's affections."

" What was that about your watch ? " asked Polly.

" Only that your uncle gave it to me ; look at it." He took it off, and Polly played with it, and tried it on, and looked at it inside and outside, and amused herself generally at the expense of the unfortunate watch, whilst its owner read his letter.

" Oh, how I wish I had one ! " she exclaimed at last.

" What, a watch ? I will give you one some day."

" Oh no, I wouldn't take it ; it wouldn't be right," she answered, speaking with that instinctive knowledge of what should and should not be which every woman has, though she cannot explain or define it.

" I think it would be right if it would please you to have it and me to give it to you. Do you know, Polly," he went on, getting up and standing before her, " I am so sorry my holidays have come, and to think I shall be a whole month away from London ! You don't know how happy I have been here."

"Have you?" she said, with only a vague notion of the hidden meaning of his words.

"I have indeed; I only wish I could stay here for ever. I say, I must wish you good-bye to-night, I suppose, for my train goes at seven in the morning, and I must be up at half-past five."

"Suppose," said Polly, impulsively, in her sweet ignorance of conventionality, and the most secure bandage in the world over her unsophisticated eyes—innocence—"suppose I get up early in the morning and you invite me to have breakfast with you before you start, for I've no provisions of my own, wouldn't it be fun?"

"Will you, really?"

"What will you say if I do?"

"Anything in the world you like," he answered eagerly.

"Say 'if you please,' very humbly."

"If you please—oh, dear Polly, if you please."

"You mustn't say 'dear Polly,'" she said, uneasily.

"It isn't right."

"Why isn't it right?"

"I don't know why," she said; "at any rate it isn't respectful."

"If you please, Miss Dawson. There—now will you?"

"Well, perhaps I will." But somehow she half wished she had not proposed it.

However, Polly told the servant to be sure and call her at half-past five, and to have breakfast ready in the dining-room at six; and added in a whisper that she could boil the water for the tea and eggs in that room, for two fires could not be well burnt at so early an hour in the morning. Robert Welch did not tell any one to call him. He knew that the knowledge that he was to have a *tête-à-tête* breakfast with Polly would be sufficient to awaken him at any hour.

He looked very happy the next morning as he sat watching Polly in her morning dress, with her hair, as she expressed it, "bundled up anyhow," getting

breakfast ready for him—it was so nice to think *she* was getting it for him—and listened to her small, slightly egotistical, but musical chatter. A pretty girl, tolerably certain that a man is over head and ears in love with her, is generally a little flustered, smiling, egotistical tyrant, and so was Polly. How Robert Welch admired her, too, as she knelt before the fire, scorching her face, waiting, teapot in hand, for the water to boil, and what sweet music it was, when the water bubbled over, and her rippling laughter—she had a low soft laugh—broke out.

“Oh, Polly,” he exclaimed at last, “how I shall miss you!”

“Shall you,” she said, as she filled the teapot and placed it on the hob to draw—“why?”

“You know why.”

“No, I don’t—how should I?” she said, and she looked up with a most successful attempt at hypocrisy. Perhaps she thought he would explain, and protestations and love-making were all so new to her that, half-afraid as she was, she half-longed for them; it was only the newness that fascinated her. But Robert Welch said nothing more then.

“I think I have blacked my fingers with that horrible kettle-holder,” she said, as she rose to her feet feeling a little awkward, and that it was better to say something.

Then they proceeded to have breakfast, and in presiding over it she took great interest, but he was contented merely to watch her between the little intervals, save once when he felt in his pocket to be sure Frederic Dawson’s letter was quite safe. That letter contained a ten-pound note; he generally received one every year as a Christmas-box, and this time he prized it very much, for with it he intended to buy a watch for Polly. It was time for him to be off at last—quite time, for he had only been too ready to linger, and he got up, and putting on his great coat, which was brown and very ugly, prepared to depart.

"I wanted to say something," he said, as he stood by the dining-room door, and she by the table, about to follow him out, "only I hardly know how;" he was shy and nervous, appearing to his least advantage, and it was so awkward, both formally standing up, looking at each other; "it was how much I shall miss you, as I told you just now, and—and if I get on—I don't mean that—but—oh, Polly, could you like me some day? and may I tell my people about you—that I am so fond of you?"

"Oh, no—no!"

"Don't you like me a bit, Polly?"

"Yes, I *like* you very much."

"And there isn't any one else?"

"No, no one in the world."

"And if some day you don't like *any* one in the world better, you will——"

"Then," she said softly, with a vague presentiment of a future in which the slightest engagement would be a terrible fetter—"then I will tell you what I will do."

"Is that all? Haven't you anything else to say to me, Polly?" he asked, a little blankly.

"No," she answered; then she looked up at him, and for the moment relented. "Not now, at any rate," she added; for it seemed hard to send him away with that grave and dreary face, when by a single word, of which she herself could scarcely understand the value, she could render its expression so different.

"Very well," he answered, obliged to be content; "but you won't forget me while I am away?"

"No, I won't."

They went into the hall then, and she opening the street door, looked out at the darkness which had not yet begun to break.

"Good-bye," he said, taking his portmanteau in one hand and her hand in the other; "and Polly," he almost trembled now, "it is mistletoe time, you know, mayn't I——"

"How dare you!" she exclaimed, and she snatched

away her hand, put herself into a passion, and walked off into the dining-room as hard as she could pelt, while he followed her, leaving the door open, and still holding his portmanteau with one hand. "How dare you," she exclaimed, standing bolt upright, and looking a perfect little monument of insulted dignity; "I'll never forgive you, and I'll never, never speak to you again as long as I live."

"I am so sorry," he said, helplessly. "Do forgive me, and say good-bye," and dropping the portmanteau, which was shabby and rubbed at the edges, he stood still imploringly waiting for her to speak.

She gave one quick glance up at him, and saw him looking the picture of sorrowful penitence—penitence in a brown great coat and the celebrated woollen comforter wound round and round his rather long and slender throat.

"Good-bye," she said, a smile creeping over her face: "but you must never make me so angry again," and she held out her hand. "You had better go now, or you will lose your train; it's getting late." Not being in love, Polly's ideas were clear and practical.

"Good-bye," he said, again; "I am so sorry, Polly. I would not offend you for anything in the world," and he looked at her flushed cheeks and still pouting lips. "Oh, my darling! how could I, when I love you more than anything the world holds."

He bent over her hand for a moment, then dropping it suddenly, took up his portmanteau and disappeared into the darkness.

Polly stood still for a moment, looking out at the early morning. "It will begin to get light soon," she said. "Oh dear!" she added gravely and thoughtfully, "I wonder if I shall ever love any one as Robert Welch loves me."

CHAPTER VIII.

MR. RICHARD BRANDFORD.



RS. DAWSON had described Margaret Albury as a "sallow-faced thing, and six-and-twenty if she was a day." Mrs. Dawson was a little severe perhaps, but she was right. Margaret was a girl—a woman rather—whom people seldom liked, and men never admired ; who had been nobody's first love, and did not seem likely to be any one's last ; clever, but too sharp, self-possessed, and far too self-satisfied ever to be popular : quick to see the comic side of a situation and the weak point in a man's character, and to play upon it—but men object to having the weak points in their characters played upon. She was well read, and had a wonderful knack of remembering the right thing in the right place ; of pouncing down and exposing the fallacy of a man's pet theory, and of spoiling the point of his most telling story by correcting the error it probably contained. All this made her appear clever perhaps, but it also made the story-teller appear small ; and there is nothing men hate so much as being made to look small, especially by a woman. Margaret Albury, too, could be sarcastic, and she prided herself immensely on that accomplishment. Now, sarcasm may be all very well in its way, and occasionally helps one to feel very triumphant, and altogether satisfied with oneself, but it is never conducive to popularity. Therefore, though Margaret Albury now and then said a telling thing, and often a sarcastic one, men passed her by ; they admired sharp bright things, but they did not care to feel their edge. Moreover, she had no beauty, not even

a quick, merry laugh, or pleasant little stories, as women of her kind often have, to render her, on the rare occasions when she chose to drop her satire and her knowledge, charming.

Margaret Albury was not, as may be easily divined, an overwhelming attraction in her paternal nest—certainly not so great a one as the little dinners her mother knew so well how to arrange, or the library of which her father was so proud. It was the latter which had been the means of making Richard Brandford a visitor. He had once, in the absence of Mr. Dawson from his office, had a long chat with his partner concerning old and scarce books, wonderful first editions and rare bindings, which ended in his going home one evening with Mr. Albury, and spending a couple of hours at Notting Hill among his literary treasures, but he declined all more sociable invitations. He never went out, he was not a party man, he did not dance nor care for fourth-rate music, he never dined away from his lodgings or his club, save with some old friends at Kensington, but he would look in sometimes at Notting Hill on his way there.

He spent Christmas in the North, but he returned to town before the new year dawned. His mother was abroad, so he intended to remain in town till June, when he would join her at Spa. He told Mrs. Albury this, though as a rule he seldom talked of himself or his plans, and after a great deal of pressing he made her happy by accepting an invitation to dine and meet the Dawsons. He should rather like to meet Mrs. Dawson, he thought; he had met her sister, and he remembered his mother once saying that Mary Wood had been rather a nice girl, though he supposed she was growing elderly now she had a grown-up daughter.

How delighted Mrs. Albury was! She dispatched an invitation to Kensington immediately, and one or two more in other directions, and she determined to give a little dinner-party which should do the household credit, and let her guests see "that they really knew

how things should be, and that she was an excellent manager." The last remark was made in a spirit worthy of Mrs. Dawson herself.

Richard Brandford had comfortable lodgings in the Bayswater Road, and at five o'clock on the day of the dinner in question he was in his dressing-gown, sitting in his easy-chair over the fire reading the last *Quarterly*, and he thought turning out a bore.

"I wish to goodness they hadn't asked me," he said, yawning, and looking over his magazine at the fire. "I don't want their dinner, or to meet their friends; only if I don't go they'll think it disagreeable, I suppose, or I should not have accepted the invitation. I don't feel in the least inclined to go and dress."

He liked reading in his dressing-gown, and he often put it on when he came in from a walk, just as he liked strolling about of a night without collar or cravat, not because he knew he looked well so—he was not an atom of a coxcomb, besides, his beard hid his throat—but he hated restraint, even in the most trifling things, and he escaped from it and carried his hatred of it almost to an excess. It was probably one of the causes of his still being unmarried, for however great a love he might have had for a woman, he felt, or fancied he felt, that the fact of his being bound to her would be its death-blow, and the ordinary routine of society, with its social laws and ever-recurring exactions, he could not have endured. He knew his own mania in this respect, yet he encouraged rather than tried to conquer it, and hugged Lord Bacon's words—"Certain . . . minds are so sensible of every restraint, as they will go near to think their girdles and garters to be bonds and shackles"—to himself, and found in that great man's recognition of the fault a reason for his own persistence in it. Nothing pleased him or suited him better than his present manner of living, quiet and as intellectual as books and thought could make it, with no hours to observe but those which suited his own convenience, with no one to demand even by courtesy or affection anything beyond what he chose

from choice to give, and with his immediately surrounding world free from any human being who, even in thought came across his pathway. Yet, his was not a selfish nature ; peculiar and fastidious to a fault, yet not selfish. From duty or a moral sense of any kind, or if the opportunity arose of doing a kind action, he would do anything ; yet from choice he would certainly do nothing, for he was naturally a very indolent man. He hated trouble—nothing was a pleasure to him which involved it. He delighted in reading, thinking, writing occasionally, and walking ; he had almost as great a mania for fresh air as he had for freedom of action. Quiet, sunshine, and books made a world for him, out of which he objected to be either coaxed or dragged. He cared for nothing beyond ; certainly for but few human beings. He did notice them enough to know them, or know them enough to like them. He almost shunned them, he hated their society, and disliked all artificial amusements invented by them. He sighed occasionally for more money than he had, for though well off, he was not rich for his position ; yet had he possessed it, the exertion of spending it would almost have bored him.

He looked as irreproachable as the greatest exquisite when he entered the Albury drawing-room a little before seven. Even Margaret Albury was roused from her cynicism, and admired him. He was a handsome man of one or two and thirty, sufficiently tall, yet not a giant, and fairly well made. He had a clever, handsome face, with a good expression, two soft, brown, thoughtful eyes, and a mouth about the corners of which lurked a capacity for quiet amusement.

“The North-country woman has not arrived yet,” his hostess’s daughter said. She had only seen him once before, but he looked so well she felt almost inclined to make herself agreeable, while he gazed round at the surroundings in which he found himself.

He was a man who had few friends, though he knew almost every one by name or sight ; who in the Row, or a saunter down Pall Mall, met a dozen men he nodded

to, yet none he stayed to chat with ; who knew what good society was, though in town the only people he visited were some old friends, the Claytons. They held precisely the same rank in life as his own family, and he himself had once sarcastically described them—he could be a little sarcastic too—“ country people, and in their own place magnates ; out of it, that is in town, passing muster as very decent folk. The masculine part of the family had their names down at one or two good clubs, kept tolerable horses, and patronised charity dinners ; the feminine part were presented at court, frequented the Park, visited among baronets’ wives and honourable misses, and lent their names to the lady patroness list of charity balls.” He was tired of his own set, though he had had so little to do with it, and he looked round with a pleased sense of novelty. He was watching two people at the end of the room, a lady and gentleman ; they were not very young, but were looking at some flowers together, almost like young lovers. They amused him considerably, and wishing to know who they were he asked his host’s daughter.

“ Oh,” she answered, “ it is Ada Crawford and George Denton ; do they not look ludicrously happy ? ”

“ Yes ; why is it ? ”

“ They have been engaged to each other these twelve years, and now they are going to be married.”

“ Why have they waited so long ? ”

“ They hadn’t any money—they haven’t any more now ; but having spent their youth and beauty apart, they think it as well to spend their middle age and ugliness together.”

“ And have they always been as spoony as they appear to be now, and as attentive to each other ? ”

“ Oh dear no, you would never have guessed there was anything between them, till they suddenly arranged matters a month or two ago ; then they remembered how much they adored each other—a last flash, I suppose, previous to total extinction.”

“ Oh,” he answered simply, amused at the cool and

self-possessed way in which she made the most candid remarks, as calmly as if she had known him for a century. She could do, or say almost anything, without being in the least fast or forward, and no one ever accused her of flirting. She had not feminine softness enough to be liable to an imputation of feminine faults. Richard Brandford generally talked to her a good deal. She amused him. She was easy to get on with; men soon knew her pretty well, and never cared to know her any better.

“That is precisely what Polly Dawson always says,” she replied; “she always says ‘Oh,’ as wisely as an oracle.”

“Polly is Mrs. Dawson’s daughter, I suppose?” looking rather astonished; “I don’t admire the name.”

“You will admire the owner, though. I don’t care about girls myself, but I think she is rather nice. She is generally a little careless or crushed looking, wears a limp dress, and too many bows and beads; has a rich, soft complexion like a peach, and always seems a little frightened. She makes me think of a crumpled rose.”

“I hope she’ll come after that eloquent description,” he said, suddenly feeling an interest in the dinner-party. “Has she any more attractions?”

“Yes, her nose turns up.”

“Oh, charming!” and he turned away, his interest suddenly abated.

“Here they come,” she said, as the Dawsons entered; and she rose to greet them. He never forgot turning round to see them. He never knew what there was in the sight to make him smile, for, man as he was, he could not take in all the little details of the scene—could not understand all Mrs. Dawson’s conscious pride of birth as she entered, nor know what music she thought the rustle of her one silk dress—that dress so seldom worn, save now and then on Sundays, and which showed so plainly the creases where it had been folded up on week-days; and he did not notice the wonderful brooch, which could not possibly be gold, set with stones

which betrayed their falseness in their magnificence; nor the old-fashioned worked handkerchief in her hand, which she held so carefully by a quarter of an inch of the middle; nor her smoothly-banded hair, and little head-dress which Polly had invented. Oh, that dreadful little head-dress, with its mock lace and cheap finery! it set Margaret Albury's teeth on edge, and it would have reconciled a milliner to blindness for the rest of her days. Somehow, he hardly knew why, Richard Brandford almost laughed, and he looked well when he laughed. There was something so unconsciously and comically vainglorious about her as she walked into the room, feeling like the central figure in a small triumphal procession. Then he saw Polly, who followed her mother—Polly in a limp white dress, which had been in the family for ages, and almost clung to her; with beads round her throat and ribbon in her hair—beautiful hair, which she wore low on her forehead, like the Greek slave, with a flash of light in her innocent eyes, with a pouting, almost defiant smile upon her lips, and a flushed and frightened look upon her face as she hung back, hardly knowing what to do. She had never been out anywhere before, and it was quite an ordeal. She felt confused and frightened, though Polly, as a rule, had a winning little air of self-possession.

Then she heard Mrs. Albury say, "This is the daughter of your old friend. Mr. Richard Brandford, Miss Dawson."

She looked up for a moment to see an amused face and two brown eyes, which reassured her immediately.

"I wonder if he is laughing at me," she thought, as she sat down and waited for what might happen next. This proved to be the arrival of the last-expected guest, a Captain Finch, a man of about six-and-thirty, who had seen a good deal of service, and was now on half-pay. He was a good-looking man, gentleman-like and accomplished, agreeable and polished, a great flirt and an excellent humbug—a man who promised and said and looked a great deal, and meant and did nothing.

"Ah, Captain Finch," Margaret Albury said, attacking him as soon as he arrived, "where are the Botanical tickets you promised me? they never arrived."

"Did they not?" perfectly aware of the fact, but looking intensely astonished. "How could I be so forgetful? I assure you I always keep a promise."

"So it seems, and that is why I heard no more of this one—you kept it to yourself." It is difficult for women of the Margaret Albury class to draw the line between brusqueness and rudeness.

Then dinner was announced, and Polly found herself going down with Richard Brandford, behind her mother and Mr. Albury, wondering how it was she felt so awkward, and where all the self-possession, which never failed her when with poor Robert Welch, had gone. She was soon at her ease, though. Richard Brandford knew perfectly that any one, however simple, is always well informed on one subject, so he made her talk about herself, and asked her a dozen questions, and listened to them with interest, and seemed amused, and made her feel that she seemed at her best, as people like to seem; and then, too, she began to discover that he had wonderful eyes. They were not large and staring and prominent and bright, obtruding upon you every moment, as if impressing you with their own beauty, but soft, kind, almost loving brown eyes; you scarcely noticed them till you knew his face well, and then you always remembered them as its distinguishing feature. So beneath their gaze Polly forgot to envy Margaret Albury her ease, or to wish vainly that her father's house and table were as well appointed as Mr. Albury's; did not even see any longer all the little defects in her own and her mother's toilets, with which she had been somewhat impressed a little while before, and chatted naturally and easily with her neighbour. He told her, in return for her confidence, but little about himself; he avoided answering any questions, though he asked her any number, and he seemed amused by her, and was a little patronising, as clever men—he gave her the idea of being clever—some-

times are with young girls, and he paid her the implied compliment of listening, seemingly pleased with her remarks—but he paid her no other.

Presently their conversation came to a lull, and they listened to a Mr. Denton, who seemed as if his special qualification was talking, as in truth it was. People asked him out to dinner because he did talk. Very good chatter it was in its way, small and light and easy, unflagging and unforced; and as there never was anything much in it, it required little answering, and so other people were able to eat their dinners in peace, if they wished to do so.

“By the way,” Captain Finch said to Margaret Albury, who sat next to him, “have you seen anything of old Grant Stanmore of late years?” It appeared the speaker had only recently returned from India.

“No; I quarrelled with Adelaide, and it ended in a general cut. I am not sentimental myself, but I don’t care for very worldly girls; so I grew tired of her at last.”

“Does she still keep up with the old set?” he asked.

“No. She never cared for middle-aged people, so they dropped through naturally, and most of the girls she knew married, I think.”

“Was that a reason for cutting them?” asked Richard Brandford, for she was seated on his right.

“In a way, yes. They were all far worse-looking than herself, and it is a tacit reproach to pretty women where ugly ones are married before them. People dislike being reproached.”

“Naturally; but how about the men, I mean the unmarried men, of the set?”

“They married, too—a good many of them did, I know; and she always dropped them when they married, because they did not marry her, I suppose; not that, I believe, she would have had one of them; but I dare say she despised them for being content with anything less.”

“Oh! come, she was not as conceited as that,” Captain Finch said.

"I don't think she was at all conceited, considering how much reason she had to be so; but she did distinctly drop her bachelor friends when they married. Lots of women do."

"Do you?" asked Polly; wondering. She was unused to this kind of conversation.

"No," she answered, with a little shrug of the shoulders. "I'm far too grateful to them for not marrying me, my dear; and I should think my gratitude is a thing likely to go on being provoked." She made haste to say this, as if fearing some one would forestall her in thinking it. No one contradicted her.

"I met old Stanmore the other day," put in Mr. Albury; "he looks as well-preserved as ever, has still his vague story about the entail and the West Indian property, and still paints daubs, and fancies himself an artist."

"Poor old fellow! he always dabbled in art," the soldier answered feelingly; "and Adelaide was very beautiful, but going out spoilt her."

There was little in him altogether, but the good that the little contained was uppermost as he spoke in the defence of the one woman he had cared for in his life, and who had thrown him over. Perhaps it was because he knew that her falseness had been the consequence of the half-love, or seeming half-love, he had given her. He had been lukewarm, and she proud and impetuous, and had allowed her head to conquer her heart, and thrown him over. He had never been in earnest with any woman since, he never would be again, but he had generosity enough to defend this one.

"Does going out spoil one?" asked Polly of her neighbour.

"Sometimes. Have you been out much?" and he looked as if he considered it doubtful or not whether she was spoilt.

"Oh no, I have never been out before to-night at all, never anywhere—I mean to other people's houses; only just for walks and—" but she stopped, for it

was going up-stairs time, and she had to rise. "No one ever asked me before," she added, as she went out of the doorway.

"What a shame!" he answered; and he thought, as he summed her up mentally, that she was rather a pretty girl, a little bit of a coquette, but a very simple one, as innocent as a kitten, and as fresh as a daisy.

Polly was glad when Mr. Brandford entered the drawing-room a quarter of an hour later, and she waited, with her eyes turned in another direction, for him to take a seat near her, but to her disappointment he crossed over and sat down by her mother. He seemed to forget her very existence, indeed, until he heard the sound of the piano, and looking up saw Polly trying to stumble through Thalberg's "Home, sweet home;" then he rose and stood near her. She could not manage it, however; her fingers trembled and refused to flutter through the runs, and at last, confused and vexed, she stopped in the middle.

"Why do you spoil that lovely thing, it is so hackneyed, that unless uncommonly well played it is a nuisance?"

"I don't know," she said, astonished at his plain speaking. "I didn't like to play anything too easy, it looks so silly."

"Can you sing?"

"Oh yes, but only very simple songs."

"Then try and sing one," he said, "and I will go and keep your seat on the sofa till you come."

She had a delicious voice, and when she was reassured, and the clear, sweet, though not powerful tones were heard, the conversation lulled till the last note of her song had died away.

"That was much better," he said, as she went back to her seat; "much better than 'Home, sweet home.'" That was all, and she was rather astonished on the whole; she thought he would have praised her performance as Robert Welch had done. "I am coming to see you one day," he said, as Captain Finch took his

seat at the piano, and began the prelude to some song dear to drawing-room tenors.

"Are you?" she said, pleased at first, till she suddenly remembered how shabby the house was, and how little hospitality he was likely to receive.

"Yes, I think I know your house, and your mother has invited me. Is it not next door to one with bright green blinds?—I pass it often going to see some friends—and it has red curtains at the windows. I have noticed it because it looks a dingy house, and stands out in contrast to its neighbours. I should say your landlord is careless, and your father an easy tenant."

"It is our own house—" she began; but Margaret Albury came up, and stopped the conversation. She wanted them to hear Captain Finch sing, which he did in a style of his own. He fancied he had a great deal of pathos, and that he threw it all into the song.

"How did you like it?" she asked Polly, as he finished.

"He has a great deal of feeling," she answered, doubtful of what to say.

"Yes, a keen sense of the pathetic, and none at all of the ridiculous."

Polly looked at the singer, and thought of the girl she had heard him mention at dinner; not that she had ever heard of her before, or knew anything of her history, but merely because she had a vague idea, she hardly knew why, that Adelaide Stanmore was a name she would some day hear again, and that this man seemed like a link in her history.

"Isn't Miss Albury amusing?" she said, turning to Richard Brandford.

"Very; she has a knack of expressing other people's thoughts, especially their disagreeable ones;" and Polly did not know what to make of his tone, only discovered suddenly that her mother was moving, and that it was time to go home.

She never knew how it was, as she left the house with her father and mother, that Richard Brandford

appeared and observed that it was a lovely night, and supposed they were going to walk on that account.

"Yes," said Mr. Dawson; "moreover we haven't a carriage, and I object to cabs."

"Not that we could not afford to keep a brougham, the same as the Alburys, only Mr. Dawson—" began Mrs. Dawson, but her husband gave her a violent nudge, which brought her remark to an abrupt ending.

"I think it is better to walk," Polly said, though a few minutes before she had so wished for a cab.

"So do I," he answered. Then they set out under the clear starlight sky, Polly tucking her white dress under her arm and putting her hands into her muff.

"Don't you find those things a great trouble to carry?" he asked, as he walked by her side.

"What, a muff? Oh, no, I am so fond of muffs," and she hugged the dried goat-skin a little closer.

"Indeed!" he said, with a half notion that this very innocent girl was chaffing him. "Why, pray?"

"They hide one's hands so splendidly. It doesn't matter if your gloves are full of holes."

"Oh, doesn't it! I should have thought it mattered a great deal if a young lady's gloves were full of holes," he said gravely, rather amused and astonished at the answer.

"Do you live far from this?" Polly asked, thinking it time to change the subject.

"No—in the Bayswater Road, that is all. Well, here is your house, so good night;" and having listened to a very effective little speech from Mrs. Dawson, he departed.

"He came out of his way on purpose to walk home with me," thought that vain Polly. "I wish I knew when he means to call; I'd make myself look so nice." Then she thought of Robert Welch. "Oh! how different Mr. Brandford is," she said; "and how proud he seems, though he is so agreeable. *He* would never have stood there in a woollen comforter, with a portmanteau in his

hand, humbly begging my pardon for having tried to kiss me ; " which was quite true—he would not. Inwardly, perhaps, she thought Robert Welch had not made the most of his chance. " Poor Robert ! " she said, though why " poor " she hardly knew ; " he is very good-hearted, but—well, I don't know what it is, but it is rather a pity that the very nicest people don't monopolise the good hearts."

CHAPTER IX.

A FIRST LETTER AND A FIRST VISIT.



THE following morning Polly had a letter, the first she had ever had, from Robert Welch. She would have opened it eagerly the day before, but she hesitated now, and thought of Richard Brandford, she did not know why, and said a little wonderingly, "Oh, if Robert only knew!"

Then she slowly broke the seal, and almost laughed; there was something so strange in having a letter all to herself from a young man. No one had ever written to her before in her whole life, excepting her Aunt Maria, and so, in the novelty of her own sudden importance, she forgot all else.

"I wonder what he says?" and she sat down deliberately, and gravely proceeded to read it, and this is what he did say:—

"*MY DEAR POLLY*,—I hope you will not mind my writing to you, but I have thought about you a great deal since I left, indeed, I do not think I have thought of any one else; and I thought you might just like a line, to know how I was going on."

"It is nothing but thoughts," said Polly, looking up for a moment from that, to a girl always most interesting document, her first love-letter. "I don't think there ought to be so many repetitions, but he writes a very good hand. Let me see: where was I? Oh, at 'how I was going on.'"

"I hope you spent a merry Christmas. I wish I had been with you; however, I thought of you."

"Another 'thought!'" she exclaimed in a pre-occupied manner.

"And I shall be very glad when I come back, which I hope will be

in another fortnight. I was very quiet on Christmas Day. I went to church in the morning and for a stroll in the evening. There are some very nice walks about here; I wish I could show them to you. I will now wish you a happy new year, and conclude with kind regards to Mr. and Mrs. Dawson, and with my . . . to you."

"That means 'love' of course," said Polly.

"Believe me to remain, Dear Polly,
"Yours truly,
"ROBERT WELCH."

"What a long ending!" and she looked rather relieved at having got through the epistle. "Oh, here's a postscript on the other side."

"I do so long to see you. I shall come back as soon as I possibly can."

"Oh, shall you?" she said thoughtfully. "I don't know why, but somehow I wish you were *not* coming back, though of course it has nothing to do with me;" and she slowly read the letter through once more before putting it into her pocket. "I remember the other day I thought I should like to hear how Robert Welch was, but now I almost wish he had not written; though I am sure I don't know why I wish that either," and she tucked his epistle down to the bottom of her pocket. "Mamma," she said suddenly, apropos of nothing, "how soon do you think Mr. Brandford will call: in two or three days?"

"Yes, I should say so. What did he talk about last night? He seemed to take to you."

"Oh, no, mamma, he didn't. He didn't talk of anything at all—that is, of anything particular;" and she thought, "I will never have holes in my gloves again, that's certain, and I think I will practise over my songs to-day, for he seemed to rather like my singing. I don't suppose he will ever hear me again, though, for of course he won't visit us much. It is all so stupid and ugly here; and then, we are nobodies, and he is a grandee. Oh, dear me!" she exclaimed to her mother, who looked up for a moment. "Wouldn't it be nice if we were rich, mamma dear?"

"Yes, wouldn't it?" Mrs. Dawson answered eagerly. "I should so like to have a nice house and a carriage to drive out in, and silks and satins to wear. You would look twice as good-looking, Polly, if you were well-dressed. If I were you I would set my cap at a rich old man."

"I never get the chance, mamma, but if I did, I would not. I would not marry just for money's sake, for all the world. It must be so dreadful." Polly's ideas had suddenly developed on the subject.

"I'll practise while mamma is out," she said the next afternoon. "No one will come this pouring wet day, so I am quite safe;" and for half-an-hour she went through her trills and scales; then she heard a double knock. "Oh! there's poor dear mamma come back," she exclaimed. "I daresay she is very wet; I will run and let her in." She rushed to the door, and opening it, found Richard Brandford facing her.

"Oh!" she said quietly, but with inward consternation. "I didn't know it was you, or I should have let the servant come to the door, of course. I thought it was mamma."

"Is she out? I came to see her," he said, laughing at her evident dismay. "Mayn't I come in?"

"Yes, of course you may. Mamma will be back directly. Come in; I am all alone." And he went in. "I did not think you would come to-day, because it rains so fast. Mamma will be very pleased to see you, I am sure." And Polly, feeling that she had received her visitor in as proper and dignified a manner as was possible under the circumstances, sat down and prepared for small talk. She looked very pretty, with her shabby dress, and crumpled hair, and eyes wandering round the room as she counted, with a feeling of half-shame, all the worn corners of the chairs, and faded patches in the covers and carpet, and wished that she had dressed herself better on the speculation of his coming. She did not know how little he noticed, or would have cared about the defects in the furniture, or understood the difference

in her dress. He amused himself with talking to Polly, and looking at her. She was pretty to look at, but she thought little, and knew little, and had little to say out of the immediate limits of her own observation ; and though she was quick and bright, and quite capable of forming opinions, and did form them, yet she did so unconsciously, and seldom expressed them, or even acknowledged them mentally. She soon told him all he cared to hear about herself and her own pursuits, and informed him again, when speaking of the Alburys, how she had never been "out" before the other night, when he met her at their house, adding that it was very dull being always at home.

"Haven't you any books?" he asked.

"Not many," she answered. "Sometimes Mrs. Albury lends mamma a love story, and I read the beginning and the end, but that is all."

"Why don't you subscribe to a library?" he said. "You could get all the best books there. I don't mean novels; you can't always be reading love stories." It seemed to Polly that he had rather a contempt for love stories.

"Papa won't let us," she replied, thinking that her papa had a settled aversion to letting them do anything that connected itself in any way with expenditure of pounds, shillings, and pence. "I have a few books upstairs, but they are not interesting: only two or three lives of very dull people, who really never did anything to entitle them to bore one with their biographies; and some poems by—oh, some initials. I don't think poems by initials can be very good, do you?"

"No," he laughed, and he thought, "She has ideas, and can think, that is evident;" then he asked her if she liked walking. Walking was one of the pleasures of his life.

"Yes, pretty well," she said, "only I don't often go out; it—" she was just going to say "wears out so many boots and gloves," but checked herself, and added, "it is not always convenient. Are you never

dull?" she asked, turning the tables on him. "You said *you* did not visit much."

"No, I don't care about visiting in a general way"—"He has come to see us, though," Polly thought, triumphantly. She was very vain, was Polly—"but I am certainly not dull."

"Ah! but then you are clever."

"No, I am not;" but he rather liked the compliment she had paid him, evidently without intending it to be one.

"Mrs. Albury said you were. She said you were quite a book-worm;" and she thought, "He does not look in the least like a worm."

"No, indeed I am not. I am fond of reading, but that is all. How do you do, Mrs. Dawson? I fear you have had a wet day for your walk," as that lady entered with a very dignified demeanour, yet feeling withal a little flustered, for she had never had one of the Benthwaite magnates in her dwelling-place before.

"Yes," she said, trying to appear quite at her ease; "but I have not been far: only to get in—" Polly gave her mother a look from behind their visitor's chair. Fancy her mamma telling Mr. Brandford she had been to get anything in! So Mrs. Dawson stopped in the middle of the sentence; but her next remark was not much better, for she explained that if she had known Mr. Brandford had been coming she would have had a fire lighted in the drawing-room; and when he replied, with just a faint gleam of amusement in his eyes—for he began to perceive that he was considered a somebody,—"Not on my account, I hope," Polly was in agony. She soon forgot it, however, when he rose to go, and hanging for a moment over the music at the open piano, asked her hesitatingly if she would mind singing a verse of the song she had sung the other night. Half frightened, yet pleased and flattered, she seated herself before the rather cracky-sounding keys, and sang the whole song, and then another, and yet another, and sang them in her best and sweetest tones, and when they

were finished she turned to him, and with averted face almost dumbly pleaded for his applause; and though he only said "Thank you; they are very pretty songs," she was more satisfied and pleased than she had been with all Robert Welch's extravagant praises.

Mrs. Dawson asked him to come again, and he readily promised he would do so, and offered to lend Polly some books, and then he went; and, if he did not trouble himself much about the inmates of the dingy house, after he had left, he found himself once or twice thinking that Polly had a delicious voice, and was very natural and simple.

"I think he liked us, Polly," Mrs. Dawson said when he had gone. "Of course it makes a great difference knowing who we are; and your poor grandpapa was so much respected. I don't suppose he knows who that Mrs. Albury's father was."

"No, mamma, I don't suppose he does," Polly said absently, wondering whether he really would come again. Her doubts on that point were soon at rest, for he appeared once or twice, on one excuse or another, before very many days had passed, and he and Polly were soon very excellent friends. She was so very fresh: that was her charm for him; so easily pleased and amused; and she was docile; for she had that faith in him and deference for him, women of her stamp generally have for clever men, who do not humour them. So as they grew more intimate he lent her books and talked to her, correcting her faults and trying to form her tastes, and give her mind a tone, in the most calm manner, and not showing withal any sign of being charmed by her. She was astonished, and rather piqued; he treated her as a spoilt child, in whose spoiling he did not mean to have a share; he laughed at her when she pretended to be pettish, and he looked at her with the greatest amusement when she was vexed. The fact was, he regarded her almost as a child, and he was good-hearted and sensible, and seeing how wasted were her days, and how quick her perceptions and capabilities, he tried to correct and

smooth away the frivolities and faults which were the natural consequence of her life, and the narrow circle in which she had been confined; but in doing this he had not a single idea of sentiment. He was one of those who accepted life and found happiness in it without depending on a single human being, or without any love, perhaps, for any one, beyond that family love—if one may so express it—which is born with us and is part of our nature.

CHAPTER X.

POLLY SPENDS A GUINEA.



AMMA," said Polly one day, two or three weeks after the Albury festival, "you must never wear that dreadful brooch again; people can see it is false."

"I am sure they can't, and I like it; I am so fond of pretty things, you know."

"Have you not any other, mamma?"

"No, my child," she answered, looking up regretfully. "Don't you remember I lost the one your grandfather gave me? That was a very good little brooch, dark red agate and a real silver rim. I wanted your father to advertise it and offer half-a-crown reward, but he said, it would be no use, and that he considered ornaments waste of money, for they paid no interest. Polly, when are you going out to spend the guinea your Aunt Maria sent you? I think you'd better buy a dress, for we shall be obliged to have the Alburys back soon, and that muslin looked very dabby the other night."

"I thought I would go this afternoon," she answered; "I shall be home by five. Perhaps Mr. Brandford will bring me the ferns to-day. Oh! here comes Jack. Why, Jack dear, are you ill?"

"Yes, a little," he answered sadly; "my chest is bad, and, Mr. Dale says, I am to lie down, and not go again to-day. No, I don't want any dinner—I can't bear cold meat. I wish we were rich and had fowls, like the Alburys." Polly had given him a full description of the dinner party, including a list of the dishes with which the guests had been regaled.

"I won't buy a dress," Polly said to herself, as she

went out to spend her guinea. "I'll buy Jack a fowl, for one thing," and she laughed at the idea. "It's such a funny present to give any one," she said; "but he shall have it made into broth. Poor mamma! How I should like to give her a gold brooch." And she went on her way thinking—thinking of Richard Brandford.

She knew he must rather like her, or he would not take the trouble to seek her out so frequently, but she was quite certain that he had not the slightest intention of falling in love with her, and, accordingly, she was rather disappointed. She was a girl who might be difficult to win, but who excessively liked being wooed, and this she expected every man to attempt; therefore, to be treated simply as an ordinary rational human being was a proceeding she did not understand. Another thing, too, she was beginning to find out how altogether different he was from Robert Welch, and the difference was not to the latter's advantage. She did not know that her heart had anything to do in the matter, as yet; she only knew that she had altered lately—that she was less careless, and quieter, and read more, and thought more, and felt, and saw a dozen faults and deficiencies in herself, which she had never recognised until this last month. Richard Brandford was a singularly inartificial type of man; he never made love to her, nor flirted with her, nor paid her compliments, nor praised her for nothing; on the contrary, he teased, and piqued, and laughed at her, treating her often as a child, and never as a pretty woman, to be flattered, and made much of, simply on account of her youth and beauty. She had not the remotest idea that he admired her in any way, and she was quite certain that he was not in love with her, for that any one could be in love with a woman, and not helplessly her slave, was beyond Polly's comprehension.

"How different he is from Robert Welch," she said; and then she thought of the letter—another letter—she had in her pocket, which that morning had brought her from Liverpool. "Poor Robert," she sighed, why poor

she did not know, for he was a prosperous, well-to-do young man.

"I wish he wasn't coming back," she said, for the second time, to herself; "and he must never call me 'dearest' again, as he did this morning, that's certain. I wonder if Mr Brandford will ever call any one 'dearest.' I don't think he will." She finished shopping, and went home to find the subject of her speculation chatting with her mother. "He must like coming," Polly thought; "and he must come to see somebody, for the house is so ugly he can't admire it; and it may be very undutiful, but I don't think he comes to see mamma." Then she took off her bonnet, and putting on her beads and the ornaments in which she most delighted, she went downstairs, pleased and flushed. "I know what I'll do: I'll make some tea, kettledrums are fashionable;" and having determined on this proceeding, she entered the drawing-room.

He had brought her some ferns, which he had had sent up from his home for her; then Mrs. Dawson went to see if Jack was better, and Polly entertained him, for a quarter of an hour, alone.

"Do you know," she said, after she had asked him a question about something she had not understood, "I am quite at home with you now, and I was so afraid of you at first. Mamma said you were very grand at Benthwaite, and the Alburys thought you a great lion."

"Well, and did you think I was going to roar?"

"No," playing pettishly with the cups and saucers, "of course I did not."

"You need not have any notions of our grandeur," he said; "we are the poor branch of the family, though the elder one. I am the head of it," and he laughed, "but my Uncle Felix is the rich man of it."

"Why is your uncle the rich man?"

"He was the younger son, and so chose a profession, and made a fortune, as his son will do after him. My father built, and altered, and mortgaged, and so on, so that our splendour is no longer great."

These were the only details he ever gave of his family, and he never said anything about himself; though Polly longed to ask why he did not take to a profession too, but she thought he might be offended.

"But you are rich for all that, are you not? You have a grand house, and servants, and carriages, and all those things."

"No, we leave all that to the Hollow people. We have a decent house, it's the family place, and there are the old servants, and so on; but as for horses and carriages, why we have only the ark."

"The ark!" said Polly, opening her eyes and thinking of the deluge.

"Yes, not Noah's ark, but the family one. An old-fashioned carriage is sometimes called an ark, you simple little person." He was getting very much at home with her, you see. A sort of condescending, patronising, easy intercourse which he found as pleasant as she did, but less dangerous; and which poor foolish Mrs. Dawson encouraged, and gloried in, and was proud of. He watched her for a moment or two as she poured out some tea, and he thought of Margaret Albury's description of her, and he thought also, well it would be difficult to say exactly what; but he asked, as Polly felt, in a most disrespectful manner, "what she wore those things round her neck for?" looking at her very best beads which she had put on in his honour..

"Why, because they are pretty," she answered, astonished; and when he looked as if he did not believe her, she felt piqued, as she was apt to do on the slightest provocation. Mrs. Dawson entered at this point, and the conversation was changed by his telling them, that he had seen Mr. Dawson the day before, who had invited him to dine, some day next week, and meet the Alburys.

"What dine here!" Mrs. Dawson and Polly exclaimed at once, both astonished at Mr. Dawson unasked, doing anything so wonderful, the former delighted, for she knew how vexed the Alburys would be

to see him on intimate terms with her, and the latter miserable, for she knew how shabby the entertainment would be.

"We never give dinner-parties," Polly said, a little ruefully.

"I know that," he answered; "your father carefully impressed upon me, that it would be a plain family dinner. I never go to parties, but having known Mrs. Dawson's people in Benthwaite, I thought I might indulge in this little dissipation."

"It is very kind of you," Mrs. Dawson said; but Polly stopped her, lest she should be too humble.

"I wish I had kept my guinea," she thought; "it would have helped to make things better."

"Polly," said Mrs. Dawson, when their visitor had gone, "what did you buy?"

"A chicken to make Jack some broth."

"Oh, how kind of you, my dear, and what dress?"

"None, mamma, I bought you this instead;" and she put a little white cardboard box into her mother's hand, which, on being opened, was found to contain an agate brooch with a silver rim.

"Oh, Polly dear, what a beautiful brooch! How kind of you, I am so pleased; I daresay that stone was found on Alston Moor. Oh, I am so much obliged to you, Polly dear, I am so much obliged to you."

So Polly spent her guinea in buying the knowledge that she had made her mother happy.

Mrs. Dawson took her present up-stairs and looked at it again, and tried it on, as Polly had Robert Welch's watch; then she pulled out her desk, a little awkward desk made years ago by a country joiner, and contrived a little clear corner in it in which to stow away her ornament. "It was very kind of Polly," she thought, "because, I know, she longed for a new dress, and really this brooch will make me look respectable. I will always keep it in remembrance of her, and she shall have it back when I die; somehow, I don't think, I shall make very old bones, I feel so worn lately, and I am sure poor

Jack won't live long." Then with that strange blending of the absurd, and the pathetic, which is seen in some natures, she wrote on the lid of the cardboard box, *For my dear good daughter Polly when I am dead.* "Henry wouldn't sell it, if he found it now," she said, as gravely as if the little trinket, which had cost some twelve or fourteen shillings, had been composed of diamonds. Then she put it away in the corner of the desk, where it remained, save on the grand occasions when it was worn, till the day, when Polly read, through blinding tears, the inscription on the box.

A few days later, Margaret Albury called at the "dingy house," as Polly always called her home, after Richard Brandford's remark, and invited Polly to come in sometimes of an evening. Somehow she liked Polly, and Polly went once, and promised to go again. Richard Brandford was there too, and he saw her home, though Mrs. Albury offered to have out the brougham, and send her back in state. Richard Brandford might dislike and shun society in general, but certainly, in particular, he did not shun Polly's. There was, by the time Robert Welch came back, quite an established friendship existing between them, or supposed to exist, that is, for friendship between a young man and a young woman, which has not had an acquaintance of years to mellow it, is generally only a supposition.

CHAPTER XI.

A CRUMPLED ROSE.



OBERT WELCH did not return until the day on which Richard Brandford and the Alburys were to dine at Kensington, nay, not until an hour before the time of their arrival to the "plain family dinner," and he had therefore scarcely time to speak to Polly, only to notice some ferns she was arranging with almost tender care, and to ask where they came from.

"From Benthwaite," she answered, while he wondered why she blushed and looked confused; "Mr. Richard Brandford, who is going to dine here this evening, sent them to me," she added.

"I see," he answered, not at all jealous; his was a very unsuspecting nature. "By-the-way, Polly, do you know if your father posted my letter to your uncle Frederic? I sent it to him, as I had mislaid the address. You know, I suppose, that your uncle has been in the south of France for his health?"

"No, I didn't," she answered, "papa never tells us anything. I dare say he posted it all right."

"I wondered, because I expected an answer before this. I am so tired with travelling to-day, but I want to show you something to-morrow, Polly;" and he went to make himself presentable, for it was nearly six o'clock. Mr. Dawson had been obliged, rather against his will, to invite him, as he wanted to use the drawing-room on the occasion.

Oh, the miseries of that dinner! Polly remembered it for months afterwards. Surely it was cruel of Mrs. Albury to come in such an elaborate toilette, and it must

have been sarcasm in her daughter to keep on her gloves, those very delicate brand new gloves, until the very moment her plate was placed before her ; and oh, the torture of remembering the dish-watery soup and the flabby turbot, and the sauce, which, as she mentally described it, seemed to be composed of flour and water, with about three oysters, each cut in four, and their respective beards, each cut in two, floating about in it. Then the young mutton which was passed off as lamb ; and the mint sauce which no one took, as if to show they detected the cheat ; and the pastry which was such conclusive evidence that there was no cook on the premises, and then the dessert. That dessert was dreadful to look at, with its unsightly apples and oranges, which seemed such outcasts from their race ; and the common biscuits, pale and half baked. Oh, it was all dreadful. Nobody talked, and she felt certain the whole time it lasted, every one was thinking how horrible it was. What a comfort it was when, after she had tried, by significant looks, to rouse her mother from the everlasting subject of Benthamite, that lady suddenly remembered it was time to "gather eyes" and go up-stairs ; yet how ashamed she was to pass Richard Brandford, who held open the door, as it seemed to her, in mere mockery of the whole affair. Even when they reached the drawing-room, things did not improve. They had nothing to say, the coffee was thick and cold, and poured into ugly earthenware cups, at which, she almost fancied, she could see Margaret Albury sneer. It was no better when the men came up, for the piano, which had been moved up-stairs to add to the appearance of the room, was so miserably out of tune that she felt afraid to touch it, and pleading hoarseness, refused, so the result was, they all sat on chairs placed at equal distances round the room, and said nothing, or merely spoke in monosyllables. The very fire refused to burn. It had not been lighted till an hour before dinner-time, and as there had not been one for a week before, the room felt damp and chilly, and betrayed the fact, while Mrs. Albury, pulling a wrap round her

shoulders, remarked "she had felt the cold so much this winter."

Polly did not "feel the cold"—her cheeks burned with shame, and her eyes flashed with vexation. She had crumpled her dress—that same limp muslin dress—by lying down just before her guests had arrived, to cure a headache which nervousness had since scared away, and she had jumped up at the sound of the first double knock, and in her anxiety had even forgotten to put herself quite "to rights" again. Perhaps Richard Brandford thought, the flush and the excitement suited her, at any rate, he became tired of looking at her from the other end of the room, and so crossing over, prepared for a chat; but Polly's conversational powers were out of order.

"Oh! if it had only been as nice as it is at the Alburys'," she thought. "I wish I had a whole sack of money, I'd spend it all, that I would, and have everything lovely!" A miser's house is an excellent school for a spendthrift.

"Why don't you go and sing?" Richard Brandford asked, thinking it would be an improvement on the present state of that social atmosphere.

"I can't," she answered, "my head aches. Have you seen my ferns?" she said, making a sudden effort to be agreeable; "they are in the recess outside the door."

"Cannot you come to show them to me?"

"Yes," she said, looking round hesitatingly; "only I don't quite know how—"

"Go and ask Miss Albury to come and see them too," understanding her.

"Ask her?" she answered, hesitating still more, thinking that what was all very well for two, was quite another affair for one or three.

"Yes," he said gravely. He understood in a vague manner the power he was acquiring over her, and he stood looking down on her accordingly, waiting for her to obey his commands.

“Miss Albury,” she said, going over to the corner by the fire-place.

“I do so wish you would call me by my first name,” answered that young lady crossly; “I hate being Miss Alburyed by a girl only a few years younger than myself, it makes me feel like her governess. Well, Polly, what is it?”

“Do you like ferns?”

“No, they are a snare and a delusion. They entrap people into thinking them lovely, graceful things, and directly you possess them, they seem to shrink in sheer dislike from you, or they cry themselves away, getting brown and dead at the edges first, like people who begin to die at their finger ends.”

“Oh, how dreadful!” and Polly opened her eyes. “Then you won’t come and see mine. Mr. Brandford is coming to look at them.”

“No, thank you.”

“I will,” and Robert Welch stood up.

“You!” She stood aghast.

“No,” said Margaret Albury, “go on telling me about St. George’s Hall, and the Liverpool people. You can see the ferns another time.”

Robert Welch resumed his seat, devoutly wishing Richard Brandford at that orient city, which, if wishes could people it, would have the most peculiar population in the world.

“Are they not lovely?” asked Polly, when they were safely outside the door, bending over the fragile drooping plants.

“You should see them at Benthwaite.”

“And do look at the maidenhair,” determined to let him see she knew all about them, “is it not beautiful?”

“Very,” looking intently at Polly’s head.

“I wish you wouldn’t,” she said pettishly; “you always tease me so, and my hair is so rough.”

“So I see,” gravely, and in rather a shocked tone.

“And my dress is crushed too. I had such a headache before you came, and went to lie down, and—oh, I

wish you wouldn't look at me," getting quite confused, "you make my cheeks burn so," and she put up her hands, cooled by the ferns, to them.

"Yes," he said solemnly, "you are altogether dreadfully untidy for a young lady, that I must say;" but Polly saw a smile creeping over his face, and was not offended by the remark. "You look like a crumpled

"Rose?" she asked saucily, little knowing that precise epithet had been applied to her, before he had ever seen her.

"No, dandelion."

"Oh, that's so ugly!" she pouted.

"I can't help that," he said. "But come," he added, suddenly remembering conventionalities, "we had better go into the drawing-room. By the way," he asked, "who is that pale-faced young man who sat opposite to me at dinner."

"That, oh, he is a ward of my uncle's, and my father looks after him; he lives here," she added.

"I see; I didn't know that," he answered; "and I should say he found his residence very agreeable," he thought. He noticed as he entered how jealously the "ward" watched him, and drew his own conclusions. "I wonder if she likes him," he thought; but when he saw how fearlessly her eyes met Robert Welch's gaze, and remembered that they had drooped a little beneath his own, he did not trouble himself with any more wonderings. A woman can control her lips, but not her eyes, which often betray the secrets she could have securely left to the keeping of the former.

"I meant 'rose,'" he said, as he wished her good night half-an-hour later, after the Alburys had departed in peace, and the envied brougham.

"Rose?" she said, puzzled. Polly was not at all a knowing girl.

"Yes, don't you remember our conversation about flowers? I said 'dandelion,' but I meant 'rose.'"

"Oh." She was too astonished even to wish him

good night. "He thought I looked like a crumpled rose," she said slowly, as she went up-stairs, "and a crumpled rose must be pretty." Robert Welch had paid her a thousand compliments, and she had forgotten them all, but she remembered that solitary one from Richard Brandford as long as she lived.

"I dare say she'll marry him," Richard Brandford thought as he entered his lodging that night. He had forgotten all about Polly as he walked home looking up at the sky, and he had calmly amused himself by tracing out constellations; but when he reached the Bayswater Road, he had suddenly remembered how jealously "the pale-faced young man" had watched him two or three times that evening. He was not conceited; conceit was a fault even his enemies, if he had any, could never impute to him, still, he did not object particularly to the idea of making another man jealous, through the possible preference of a pretty girl, no man does, especially when he knows he has done nothing for which he can even blame himself in the matter. "I dare say she'll marry him," he said. "They will drift into matrimony almost without being aware of it. Rather a pity, for she is not at all a bad sort of girl, and he does not seem to have much in him. I dare say she likes him pretty well though, for all that, and tyrannises over him with her pretty ways and pleading eyes. She is a nice little girl too," he repeated, as he poked the fire and turned up the lamp; then he forgot all about Polly and her future, which he felt did not concern him, and all his own speculations on the subject. It was odd, too, for somehow as he lay down on the sofa for half an hour's pleasant laziness, he fell to thinking about love, why he did not know, only of love in the abstract, for he never troubled himself about it in any other light. He thought how strange a thing it was, the way in which a man bowed down to a woman, and put on voluntary chains for her sake. "He could not do it," he said almost scornfully to himself, and he remembered with peculiar satisfaction

Lord Bacon's words in his essay on the grand passion—“As if a man, made for the contemplation of heaven and all noble objects, should do nothing but kneel before a little idol.” “I could never ‘court’ a girl,” he said aloud, and he laughed at the very notion of himself humouuring a woman’s whims and fancies, hanging upon her word, or smile, or frown, and indulging in all the exaggeration of thought, and word, and deed, which is a part of that April-day like happiness about which men and women so much concern themselves. “After all,” he said, as he looked with satisfaction round his comfortable bachelor lodgings, “matrimony must be a great bore. I should get tired of seeing the most beautiful woman that ever lived everlastingly smiling at me from the other side of the fireplace. It does away with one’s freedom too, and indifference to conventionality; and the perpetual routine of visiting and receiving, which women delight in, and life by rule and clock-work, and the doing as other people do, because you have not energy or independence enough to do as you choose, would be insufferable to me. I should hate, too, being expected, though merely from courtesy, to give an account of myself of my going out and coming in, and intentions, and resolutions, even to a wife; and without those sort of attentions, a woman gets discontented and miserable.” Then he reached a book, and pulling the table and lamp nearer began to read, while the little girl in the dingy house at Kensington dosed off into her first sleep with his good-bye words echoing sweetly in her ears, and hazily entering into her dreams, words which he had already forgotten.

CHAPTER XII.

“YOU ARE VERY DIFFERENT.”



HE winter had passed ; the frightened snow-drops had fled before the ardour of the sun ; the fast, impudent-looking little crocuses had died in their soiled finery, smeared by the mud and soaked by the rain ; the primrose had lost its first sweet shyness ; and the lilac, that prim, delicate flower, which always looks fit for a Quaker's paradise, was slowly opening into bloom.

Outwardly the inhabitants of the dingy house at Kensington were precisely the same as when the Alburys gave their triumphal dinner, actually they were very different. Mrs. Dawson had aged, her sight was failing, and she had been obliged to take to wearing glasses, which were common, with steel rims ; how she longed for pebbles, with gold ones. Her husband continued in his old way, but he was anxious about his brother. Frederic Dawson's health had compelled him to throw up his post, and he had been for some time past in the south of France recruiting his shattered energies. “I should like to see England again,” he had written, “and I want to see your boy, and young Welch, though I am annoyed with the latter, for since he left Liverpool he has scarcely written to me, and I expected to hear what his prospects generally were, especially as I intend to advance them, though I fear I shall not live long enough to do much for any one.” The cause of Robert Welch's seeming neglect was known to the lawyer better than to any one else.

Jack was not stronger. The spring and the sunshine had done but little for him ; he was more listless

and languid than ever. The education his uncle had been the means of obtaining for him, had raised him up a friend in the person of his master, Mr. Dale. He saw that the boy's weakness was not merely the result of his having outgrown his strength; and day after day, if only for a few minutes, he tried to direct his thoughts to heaven. Jack was ready to hear all his master said to him, and forgot the fairy stories he had formerly delighted in, and read the better books which were lent to him; and so the grain of seed took root, and his thoughts wandered on to the land towards which he felt instinctively he was journeying. The alteration for the worse in his health was so gradual, that none of his family noticed it; but there was one person who saw it, and soon found out how much neglect had to do with it, and that was Robert Welch—good, warm-hearted, rather empty-headed Robert Welch. Mrs. Dawson and Polly did all they could for the boy, though even they did not recognise his danger, but they were powerless to give him change of air, and medical advice, and luxuries; so Robert Welch, almost without their knowledge, tried to rectify the worse than negligence of the father. He took him out of an evening as the spring advanced, and the air was no longer chilly, if only for an hour's stroll, or brought home little delicacies, that made Jack's eyes glisten with gratitude, for his nature was a grateful one, and he saw and appreciated every act of kindness. Often, too, on a Sunday, Robert Welch would make Jack get up early, and carry him off to church at Chislehurst or Sevenoaks, or some place a few miles away from the brick and mortar of London; and after the service they would dine together on some nice things brought with them. Then they returned, walking through the green fields of Kent, listening to the birds, with contented and thankful hearts, feeling as they passed through the shady woods, with the sunshine glinting through the trees, and the wild hedge-flowers rising on every side, that they were surely intended for Nature's church.

It always seemed to Jack that the trees knew it was Sunday, and rustled reverentially, and waved more sedately, as if they felt its influence. He clasped his hands once almost in ecstasy—this child who, till he knew the thoughtful friend at his side, had scarcely seen the grass and daisies, or felt Nature's canopy of leaves above him—and exclaimed, not to Robert Welch, but almost to God, "Oh! how beautiful it is!" And he looked up, as he spoke, as naturally as the birds warble their sweetest notes with upturned beaks, as if sending their song heavenwards. So there crept into his heart love and gratitude towards a Father, whose dwelling seemed to draw nearer to him, and whose country he was learning to call "Home."

"Robert," he said one day, as they waited for a train which was to take them back to London—they had walked as far on their return journey as the way was countrified—"don't you think it is wrong to travel on Sundays?"

"Well, I don't know," his companion answered. "You see, we do not do it for pleasure only, and you are not strong enough to walk, as I should if alone."

All the way home he considered that question of Jack's. He had been brought up by religious people, and the travelling had jarred upon his conscience too, and it did so more, now that he knew that Jack had thought of it, for to lead Jack into even a fancied sin appeared a double iniquity in him. Then, as he looked at the thin pale face opposite to him in the railway carriage, he wavered, and thought it could not be so very wrong. Still the question weighed upon his mind.

"Polly," he said one day, as that young lady sat diligently mending a rent in her dress, she had become more tidy lately, "I have given up the Alexandra, so your suggestion is of no use."

"Given up the Alexandra!" she exclaimed in astonishment; "what for?" The Alexandra was a rowing club to which he had belonged for a few weeks, and in which he had taken great delight.

"I think I shall enjoy spending a few hours with Jack on Saturday afternoons in the country, instead of going so far away on Sundays. He looked as if he did it solely for his own satisfaction, but the resolution had cost him something, for he had been very happy paddling about on his half-holidays, pretending to practise rowing. The suggestion to which he referred was one that Polly had saucily made, that he should invest in a life-belt and a diving-bell, lest he should tumble into the water, when no one was near to fish him out again.

"Oh, Robert," she answered, "how kind you are; I know you do it for Jack's sake."

"I fear I shall not do it for long," he said, "for Mr. Waitman, the manager, told me to-day that I should only have a month more in London, and that then I am to be transferred to Liverpool. Are you sorry?"

"Yes, very," she replied; but her eyes met his in honest candour, and he was not satisfied.

"Polly," he said a little desperately, "do you think you will ever come to Liverpool?"

She knew what he meant, and she looked up at him almost sorrowfully, for she understood his feelings now, and had no vanity nor coquetry in the knowledge, only grave regret, as she answered him simply, "No, Robert, dear Robert, never." He had grown to be so like one of the family, so intimate, and had improved so much on acquaintance, that she had a quiet, almost sisterly affection for him, though she knew it would never be anything else.

"Ah, Polly," he answered, "how I wish you were the same as when I went away before Christmas—I could hope then. You have altered since those days; I wish I knew the reason."

He was quite right, she had altered, and, with eyes sharpened by love, he had discovered it the very day after his return from his holiday, and it had been a whole month before he had found courage enough to say

what he had meant to tell her on the following day. It was, that with the ten pounds Frederic Dawson had sent him, he had bought a little gold watch for Polly, but for four weeks, day after day, he had longed to tell her of its being in his possession, and had not been able to do so. Then he had asked her to accept it, as humbly as a slave might lay some offering at an eastern monarch's feet, but Polly had refused his present.

"It would not be right for me to accept it," she had said, "though it was *very* kind of you to buy it for me, Robert."

"Why?" he asked.

"I can hardly tell you," she answered, "only I would rather not; for one often feels the difference between right and wrong, though one cannot explain it."

"It is something about—it has something to do with what I said to you the morning I went away, I suppose," he said, dubiously, hanging his head.

"Perhaps," she said gently, remembering how she had looked after him as he disappeared in the darkness, just before the light began to dawn.

"And are you sure you mean it?—I mean will you never—?"

"I am *quite* sure," she said, more gently still.

Then he was silent for a few minutes, and sat down looking vacantly out of the window with a troubled look on his boyish face. He had ceased to talk of his health lately, or to wear woollen comforters; and usually he had a bright, boyish face when he was at his ease—a face which seemed as if the years had passed lightly over his brow, and time had forgotten to count them, and left him too youthful-looking for his age.

"Polly," he said presently, getting up and going to where she was sitting, "I am awfully fond of you, I know that, but I won't bother you about it ever again; and look here, shall we try and be great friends?" She gave a little quick nod, and he went on, "And will you

wear this just to please me, and in token of our compact?" and, almost tremblingly, he placed the watch in her lap.

She looked up doubtfully, but seeing his face, relented, and opening the little case looked at it, not with a scream of delight, as she would have done before Christmas, but gravely and almost regrettfully, till her nature, which as yet was stronger than the alteration in time and fate were working in her, triumphed, and a smile crept over her face.

"Very well," she said, pleased, and blushing, with downcast eyes that almost gave him hope, in spite of her contradictory words, "I will wear it always for your sake, just as if you were my elder brother." Then she got up, and taking it out of the case, looked at it, and stuck it into her waistband, for she had no watch-pocket in her dress, and went to the glass and saw the little gold handle protruding above, and pulled it out and looked at the time, then her smile broke into a low, sweet laugh. "Oh Robert!" she exclaimed, "isn't it lovely!" And she looked for the key and wound it up, putting down her head to listen to the music of its ticking.

She had worn it ever since, and the subject, they had discussed when it was given, had been unspoken of, until the day when he gave up the Alexandra Club for Jack's sake.

"How am I altered?" she asked.

"I cannot tell you, Polly," he answered, "I feel it more than see it; but you are very different from formerly." He looked down at her face and at her eyes, which were shy and downcast—and yet, he felt not shy and downcast for him—and then, with an almost foreshadowing of the future, and in nearly the same words she had once used addressing himself, he exclaimed, "Oh, Polly, my darling, I wonder if you will ever understand—if you will ever love any one as I love you."

"Ah," thought Polly, as she went up-stairs to indulge

"I do understand
that you are a woman on the stairs and
you went up to her own room. "I
said. "And yet the difference could
not be greater, for it was chiefly
the men that changed, and they
will not give our
lives a greater and graver,
and a more careful and
a more self-conscious as
they are persons and childish,
and it was a man a more developed
and he acquaintance with

and enterprising, and fond of
society. Edward Bradford yet
never had a sentimental
moment, and whenever he thought of
her, it was in the eye of his mind's eye.
He considered calmly and
correctly the course of her life, and inferring her
error, he said, "Had she been in error,
she has been a sinner, less
than others, but she has had fewer tears to
waste, and less trouble, but she would
have been a friend to a frivolous,
and a trifling person, because walking in a beaten
path, she had no desire to swerve from
the way of truth. She would
have been in the common course of the common
world, but for her, with the
rest of the ordinary women
of the world, she could not have
been in contact with not one action
of her life, that could either help, or prevent her name
from being the object of the forgotten. In most

characters there is a latent fire, a power of thought and feeling, and will, and action, which may never be awokened nor developed, save by chance, but if that chance comes, it turns the current of a life. So with Polly; her mind was cramped, not naturally narrow; she was capable of becoming a clear-sighted, loving, unselfish, thoughtful woman, with a strong sense of what was right, and a strength of mind which would prevent her departing from it. It was this which Richard Brandford was the first unconsciously to divine—unconsciously, because he did not know the attraction, for attraction she must have had for him, which drew him from his ordinary habit of dealing with human beings. He had passed unnoticed a dozen more beautiful and more witty women, yet this girl, with her frivolity and frothiness, interested him, and the reason was, that, without knowing it, he saw that she was neither characterless nor colourless, and he tried, to what end he knew not, to develop her mind. He never dreamt of paying her particular attention, he never reflected on her sweet face or sleepy eyes, nor troubled himself about her feelings; and he had no idea, as some men of his class have, of allowing himself to be gracefully and silently loved, and feeding his vanity on the reflection. Such matters never entered into his consideration, and he forgot that they did into other people's. As he lived an inner, thoughtful, quiet, self-contained life, so he tried to lead Polly to do the same, because he felt that her present one must make her chafe with impatience beneath its yoke, when she became alive to its smallness and pettiness; because also he knew that the most matter-of-fact home duties, the most dreary routine, can be sufficient for contentment (or could be, it seemed to him), if there is an inner world of thought and a sanctuary of the soul kept sacred from the current of petty troubles and pleasures. The experiment had been successful in a measure, but the lesson was difficult to learn, because Polly's thoughts strayed so often from the lesson to the teacher. He was so

different from any one she had ever known. He was rather above her in social position, and his very manners had a fascination for her ; then he was handsome, and clever, and unconventional, and he never flattered her. He was not overpowered by her charms, he showed her plainly that he could exist without her, for he often did not see her for a fortnight, while she counted the days in which he did not come. He never hesitated to correct her, and so, with an almost feverish longing for his praise, she tried to hide or smooth away her faults, and yet hourly became more painfully aware of them. She tried to improve herself, simply that she might not feel so far away when he talked to her ; and she endeavoured, in every manner she could devise, to find out his ideals, if ideals he had ; to know what he best liked and admired in woman, so that, however feebly, she might try to win a crumb of admiration or regard. So by degrees, for there could be but one ending to it all, Polly fell in love with him. He never for a moment gave her any reason to imagine he reciprocated the feeling she had for him (of which he had not the slightest idea) ; he never once said a word her heart could find food in remembering, but in refusing to let her conquer him, he conquered her. She loved him so gradually, love crept so quietly into her life, that she scarcely knew when it came, and when she did she never even dreamt of his returning it, or knowing that she cared for him. She saw no fault in her hero ; he might have been a shade selfish, perhaps, in his love of ease, yet she did not see it. Once it occurred to her that he was rather lazy, and she felt uneasy for a little while, and asked him on one of his visits why he had never worked at a profession, as he had told her himself that he was not very rich. He answered her almost in surprise, " Why should I ? the ranks are full enough of those who have their bread to earn, why should I be one of those who help to make their task still more difficult ? "

" But what do you do all the time you are in the North ? "

"I have plenty to do. The life of a country gentleman need not be useless nor idle; and if one's circle is small and one's life quiet, it is not necessarily selfish. No, Polly, I can always, I fear, find more work than my hands care to do."

"Yes," she answered; "but you said you were not rich, and the money would be nice if only to do good with."

"So you think it would be an excellent thing to help to take the bread out of other people's mouths to supply myself with luxuries, and throw the crumbs I do not want to the beggars. There would be no merit in that; no, I have plenty to do at home and in town. I enjoy idleness; it is not altogether unprofitable either."

"I dare say he is quite right," Polly said to herself, as she thought of this conversation, while she sat alone in her room, on the day Robert Welch had given up the *Alexandra*. "He always thinks better than any one else."

CHAPTER XIII.

THE LAWYER GOES A JOURNEY.

T was the twenty-ninth of May, and the last evening of Robert Welch's residence at the "dingy house" (as Polly called it, though why he could not imagine); on the morrow he was to leave London for Liverpool, and on the following day to begin his new duties there. His one box and his portmanteau, which had become still more shabby and rubbed at the edges, were packed up, he had said all the civil things he could invent to Mrs. Dawson, all the regretful ones he felt to Jack, and looked all he dared to Polly. Mr. Dawson, who was now in his study, had an hour ago made him a most moral and effective little speech, the purport of which was, that he hoped he would persevere in an edifying course of conduct, and that he (Henry Dawson) would always be his friend. In words, Mr. Dawson's generosity and entire conduct were always beyond reproach. Mrs. Dawson had expressed her hope that he would not forget her, nor the flowers, and particularly the lavender he had promised to bring her in his holiday, which he had informed her he should certainly spend in town, and she was quietly wondering how it was that, seemingly, he and Polly had not "taken to each other," not without, however, a secret hope, that the Benthwaite aristocrat had something to do with Polly's blindness to the merits of the merchant's clerk. "I almost think he's looking after her," she said to herself, as she thought of the former, "for he comes so often, and though I am sure he likes *me*, a young man does not care to come and see an old

woman," and she tried to feel venerable, though she would have been indignant, if any one had told her she looked so. "Of course my day has gone by," she added, and though she sighed, she said it very complacently, for she had an inward conviction that her "day" had done nothing of the sort, but would last her life, for people could see she was a lady ; she thought "that makes such a difference, and ensures respect."

Robert Welch having nothing better to do, was looking out of the dining-room window, with his hands in his pockets, and was thinking not of Polly, nor of his sorrow at leaving the delightful locality of Kensington, but he was thinking how strange it was he had not heard from Frederic Dawson since Christmas. Had he not gained the good opinion of his firm through his own ability, it might have made a great difference in his prospects ; for his father's friend had distinctly promised to do something for him, and as Robert Welch had excellent reason for knowing, had meant it ; yet when the time came, that the financial aid he had offered could have advanced his prospects, no notice had been taken of his letters. He could not understand it.

"Polly!" he exclaimed suddenly, "there's a telegram coming here."

Polly rushed to the door and took it in herself.

"It is for papa," she said. The lawyer opened it nervously, and Polly, lingering with excusable curiosity, read over his shoulders, "*You and ——.*" She could not see any more, for he jerked it on one side.

"My brother is very ill," he said, "there is a train for Dover at half-past eight." He looked at his watch. "A quarter to now," he exclaimed. "Polly, send for a cab, while I get a few things together." For once the lawyer was in a state of real excitement, and rushed up-stairs to fill his carpet bag.

"I wonder what the telegram said," Robert Welch said, standing with his back to the window, his heart beating quickly.

"I don't know," Polly answered, but "Uncle

Frederic must be very ill, I think; I never saw papa so excited before." The tears came into Robert Welch's eyes. He owed all the happiest days he remembered before his visit to the dingy house, even all the praise and encouragement he had had in his life, to the brother to whom Henry Dawson was hurrying, and Robert Welch remembered it gratefully, and with a sad and full heart.

"I don't suppose I shall be back for a few days. Tell Albury I'll write to him," the lawyer said entering.

"Is your brother at Dover?" Robert Welch asked, coming forward.

"I don't know; I have not time to look again." And he busied himself putting on his coat.

"Mr. Dawson," said Robert Welch, after a few minutes' silence, "is your brother very ill? for if you do not object, I should like to go with you, if he is only at Dover; I can easily—"

"Certainly not," the lawyer began, almost enraged; but he softened down. "No, my dear Welch, there's no occasion for you to go. It would be waste of time and money, I will write and tell you how he is."

"But is he very ill, Mr. Dawson?" he repeated anxiously. "If he is only at Dover, I could easily run down with you now, if only for an hour or two, and return."

"My dear Welch," the lawyer said blandly yet nervously. "I cannot allow you to go and see my brother, I will give you all particulars."

"But if you would tell me where he is."

"I have told you already that I will write," he said angrily, "moreover I wish to be alone with my brother. I promise you your interests shall not suffer in any way, if you are thinking of them."

"I was not thinking of any interests," he answered proudly. "I was thinking of the best friend I ever had, and that I should like to see him."

"Quite right," the lawyer said, recovering; "if he gets worse, I will telegraph to you. Good-bye, you

go to Liverpool to-morrow, so it is good-bye for some time ; my best wishes for your success ; don't come out in the cold, Jack." And Henry Dawson jumped into the cab and vanished.

"How could I be so stupid?" he said to himself as he rolled along. "I was nearly reading the telegram aloud."

"I cannot understand why papa so objected to your going with him," Polly said to Robert Welch, remembering those two words of the telegram she had seen. "What did he mean about your interests?"

"Your uncle promised to give me a start in life as he called it. I did not care about that, but I should like to have seen him, if he is ill especially. What are you looking for, Polly?"

"Only a book."

"Oh, I saw one with a new binding lying about." That was how Robert Welch recognised books. "Here it is." His eyes followed her round the room, but she did not heed them ; he looked up into her face, and thought it the loveliest ever seen ; but she did not know or care. She carelessly cut open the leaves, and looking up briskly, began : "You know who Spenser was, Robert?"

"Some ancient swell, wasn't he?"

"Ancient swell, oh, Robert ! he was a beautiful poet."

"Oh, I did not know. Well, what of him?" not in the least interested.

"How very soon one gets to the end of all Robert knows," she thought, and then she said aloud, "Well, there's a beautiful picture of him in that shop we passed the other day."

"I saw a big picture there, but I did not stop to look at it."

"Oh, Robert," she answered, pettishly, "it's no use talking to you, you never remark or make remarks," and she shut her book with a jerk. "I shall go and look to my ferns."

"Oh, no, Polly, don't go. It is my last evening here, don't go. I cannot think why it is you have altered so; you never used to care for these things." Then Polly, seeing his regretful face, opened her book again, and pretended to read. Presently looking up, she saw that he was watching her with grave, wistful eyes, filled with tears.

"How can you be so stupid?" she said, failing in a laugh, while a dull, aching pain crept into her own heart, for she understood it all now. Then suddenly she held out her hand to him. "We will always be friends, Robert, shall we—very great friends?"

"Yes," he answered, "and if ever you want any one to help you in any way, you *will* let me, won't you, Polly?"

"Nonsense, you'll forget me in a month."

"No," he said, "I shall never forget you as long as I live, Polly;" and he spoke not passionately, but gravely and sadly, so that she, hearing him, and seeing his earnest face, could not doubt him.

The next day Robert Welch went to Liverpool.

"I am so sorry he has gone," Mrs. Dawson said. "He was a very nice young man, and very polite to me. I hope your uncle Frederic is better," she said presently, not very much concerned, however, for she had only seen him once in her life. "Your father says it will probably be a week before he's home."

After Robert Welch went away, Jack clung to Polly again with all his old affection, and she, dimly beginning to see the change which had come over his face, grew alarmed.

"I think we had better keep him at home and from his lessons for a little while," she said to her mother. So she went round to Mr. Dale's to explain his absence, and hearing his comment on her report of the boy's health, came away with a heavy heart. Her affection for her brother was one of the deepest feelings of her nature, but like most feelings of the kind it flowed

evenly and quietly, scarcely recognised even by herself, until something occurred to ruffle its unusually smooth surface. He had been ailing so long, that though at one time she had feared for his life, she had at length, like her father, hoped and concluded, that the weakness was mainly the result of a delicate constitution, which he would outgrow. "I know what I will do," she said to herself as she walked along the High Street at Kensington, one morning when her father had been away a week. "I'll put on my oldest things, and I'll make Jack look very shabby, and take him to a doctor before ten in the morning, and get advice. Ever so many give it gratis at that time; I've seen it stated on the brass plate on their doors."

Suddenly two people brushed by her, and she heard a girl's voice laughingly exclaim—

"What a shame of you, Dick, you get worse and worse every day." Polly did not hear the reply, but she looked up and saw that the speaker was young and pretty, and that her companion was Richard Brandford.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE GHOST OF A QUARREL.



H, no, Polly," Mrs. Dawson exclaimed, "you must not think of taking Jack for advice gratis; what would people say if it ever came out? Your poor grandpapa was very intimate with two or three doctors at Benthaite, and they all knew I married a Mr. Dawson."

"But, mamma," Polly said, gravely, and Polly's face had grown quite careworn during the last four-and-twenty hours, "a doctor does not send a list of his charity patients all over the country, and Jack's health is more important than our consequence at Benthaite." Then Mrs. Dawson's lip quivered, and the tears came into her eyes.

"It is all your father's fault," she said. "We have never had fair play; we never had proper nourishment, or warm clothing, like other people. I believe I shall follow him soon, poor fellow, I am as weak as a cat, and my face is so long and thin, and yet I used to be such a nice-looking girl."

So Polly had her own way, and the next morning took Jack to the doctor, who shook his head, and asked questions which made her clasp her hands in dumb agony beneath her old cloak, and wonder whether if she sold everything she possessed (and that was very little, poor child), she would be able to buy Jack the comforts which were prescribed for him.

"He is in a very critical state, mamma," she reported, "and the doctor said that he should like to see his father. I fear he thinks Jack is very bad indeed,

and I am sure at first he thought it was a case of neglect, or that we were dreadfully poor."

"So we are," Mrs. Dawson answered, sobbing and speaking more sensibly than usual, as she stood face to face with the truth. "Very, very poor, my dear, for we do not get even common affection or care from your father, who ought to prize us above all else in the world. Surely his love of money is almost a curse."

"Hush, mamma," Polly said, kneeling, and putting her hands gently over her mother's mouth. "Remember of whom you are speaking."

"Oh! but if he dies," Mrs. Dawson said, in her old childish manner, "it will break my heart. He is such a pretty little fellow, and I used to be so proud of him, when he was a baby. I believe poor Jack and I will both be in our graves soon, for I can't stand things at my time of life, as I used."

"You will be better soon, darling mamma," Polly said, looking at her mother's face, and noticing for the first time how thin it was getting. "The warm weather will do you good, and —" but she stopped, for there was nothing more to say, and Mrs. Dawson, putting her head down in her hands, sobbed pitifully again. "Dear mamma, you are not well, and this has been too much for you," Polly said. "Come and lie down a little while in papa's study," and then leading her in, Polly bent gently down, and kissed and soothed her, as she would have done a child, until presently Mrs. Dawson dropped off to sleep, but still Polly sat and watched her until half an hour later, when Margaret Albury was announced, and she crept out on tiptoe to receive her.

She had called merely out of civility, and stayed chatting for half an hour or so. One bit of news she told Polly which surprised her—that the firm of Dawson and Albury had talked about dissolving partnership. Mr. Dawson had taken to speculating lately, she said, and it had caused some words, for there was a certain amount of business capital which it had been agreed



should remain untouched. "It is strange," Margaret Albury remarked; "what an infatuation is a love of dabbling on the Stock Exchange. Your father is almost a miser at heart, and yet from a desperate love of gain, he risks losing all he has. They have made up their quarrel, however, our respective fathers have, and yours has agreed not to speculate; perhaps he has been bitten slightly, for he volunteered a promise to have nothing to do with Capel Court, and you know the partners agree on one sort of gambling point; they like speculating in intricate or seemingly hopeless cases, in which winning means winning a great deal, and losing not losing very much."

"Oh," said Polly, not in the least comprehending the would-be clever remark about Capel Court.

"What is the matter with you, Polly?" Miss Albury next enquired; "you look so unhappy to-day." Then Polly told her of Jack's illness. "Ah, Mr. Brandford remarked only yesterday, when he called to wish us good-bye, how ill he looked, and said sea-air would do him a world of good."

"Good-bye. Has Mr. Brandford gone anywhere?"

"Yes, didnt you know? He has gone to Spa, started last night."

"Oh." That was all she said, but she looked up for a moment a little blankly, and thought to herself, "He might have wished me good-bye."

"He used often to come and see us at one time," Margaret Albury continued; "but he fell off lately: exhausted our stock of original remarks, I suppose, found our evenings dull, and our dinners not sufficiently good to compensate him for enduring them."

"He didn't care for dinners," Polly said, flushing; "besides, he is well off, and could pay for fifty dinners if he liked."

"Probably, but for his own sake I hope he could not eat them. Well, good-bye; take care of your brother;" and she rose to go, wondering at Polly's altered face and manner. She turned round suddenly as she

was going out into the hall : "Polly," she said, "do you remember those people you met at our house, who had been engaged so long, it is all broken off."

"What, after so many years?" scarcely able to speak in her eager longing to be alone.

"Yes, after so many years, rather a pity, is it not? He jilted her—grew tired of her I suppose," she said, in the usual sarcastic tone; then she looked at Polly's face and saw how pale it was, and with a hazy remembrance that she had flushed at the mention of Richard Brandford's name, added, with a shade of bitterness for which she could scarcely account, "There is a great deal of good love wasted in the world, Polly; you will find that out some day, perhaps; it is a very weary old world," and she almost sighed.

"Yes it is," Polly answered petulantly, almost crying, "a very weary world—a horrid, disagreeable old ball, I have found *that* out already;" and she gave a short, quick laugh, just as the sun sends a blinding flash sometimes from behind a black cloud before the rain begins to fall. Then she opened the street door, and half-puzzled, half-wondering, Margaret Albury departed.

"He might have wished me good-bye," she said, as she went back to the dining-room. "He found time to go to the Albury's;" and her mother being still asleep, Polly sat down in the big easy chair to realise her position. It was a difficult task to do so, for she had been so satisfied with the past days, though she had had no dream of winning Richard Brandford's love, as she had won Robert Welch's; but had merely hoped to keep him on the footing, on which he had been for months, attentive and agreeable, and seeming to like her society. This had been sufficient for her happiness, more than sufficient; it had formed a glorious present, from which she could spare no moment to look out into the future, and ask herself, how it was all to end. Friendship had seemed such an easy game, but he had proved the better player, and she had lost. She was not heart-broken, not

even hopelessly miserable. She felt that had he wished her good-bye, she could have reconciled herself to his departure; so little pacifies a dreamer, and that little formal attention would have been so grateful to her. She loved him, that was certain, but she exacted nothing from him in return. She hoped he would never even guess her feeling for him, and she was content to live on, silently devoted to him, till the end of all time. It was quiet, even-flowing love, a love in which there was no eager, passionate longing always to be near him, always to see him, no all-absorbing passion which prevented her from fulfilling her home duties, and finding pleasure and anxiety enough in them to satisfy her. There was only one thing that she could not bear,—the thought of any other woman's face finding a first place in his heart, though she might never win any at all there; and so, the knowledge that he was gone contained this slight balm, that he had left behind him all those who might have claimed attention from him in town. She was not lukewarm, on the contrary, she was warm and enthusiastic, but she was not easily won. She had not immediately succumbed to Richard Brandford, she had admired him, and thought his ideas and opinions better than any one else's she had ever known; she had found him difficult to please, and yet thought him worth trying to please; and so love stole into her heart, to rest quietly hidden there, till time should weaken and wear it away or develop it into the one grand passion of her life.

Things improved a little that evening; a letter came from the master of the dingy house, a curt cold letter, merely saying he should be home in two or three days; and should probably not have time to write again. Mrs. Dawson was better after her sleep, and Jack looked brighter, and sat propped up on the sofa, eating some little delicacy Polly had made him.

"I am sure he looks better, mamma," she said, the next day, with all the hopefulness of youth, "and I have such an excellent idea. Why can't you and Jack go,

and stay at Benthwaite with Aunt Maria for a bit? I believe we could manage with very little direct help from papa, and there would be no expense when you were there." Mrs. Dawson caught at the idea.

"It might do him good," she said, "only your aunt never liked your father, and he knows it, and might object to our going."

"I don't think he would, if he thought it over." Polly reflected that her father would be sure to see that, beyond the railway fares, there would be no other expense.

"I *should* like it," Mrs. Dawson said longingly. "And Jack would be taken good care of, and everybody would remember your grandfather. Perhaps your father would let you go too, Polly, only your Aunt Maria might object to take in so many of us, and then you haven't anything to wear, and I shouldn't like people to see you shabby." Polly's heart gave a bound. It was not Benthwaite she cared to see; but Richard Brandford's house, and while he was at Spa, she reflected she might be able to see, without fear of she hardly knew what, the hills he had looked at all his life, perhaps even she might dare to gaze with unfrightened eyes at the house in which he lived.

"Papa would never consent to let all of us go," she mused that afternoon, while her mother as usual was lying down, and Jack was sleeping with his golden head on his mother's arm. "But mamma will be sure to hear about him while she is there, and talk about him when she comes home." It seemed that even to hear him talked about would be a happiness worth living for. Then Polly fell to thinking about him again. "If he had only come once more," she said to herself; "if he had only not so pointedly forgotten me. I wonder if I shall ever see him again. I think I could be content to live years of waiting if I knew I should see him at the end of them. Perhaps—he—will be married then. I think it very likely," she added drearily, torturing herself in a girlish and most unnecessary manner. "Oh

dear ! I shall never be married, of course." Not that she ever for one single moment had thought of Richard Brandford's marrying her, but a woman generally declares in perfect good faith even to herself that she means to be an old maid, until the right man asks her to break her resolution. " He was so different from Robert Welch," she continued thoughtfully. " I remember I thought so from the very first." Then she rose, and walked slowly up and down the room gravely thinking, staying now and then for a second absently to pick up some stray thread from the floor, or to put a chair in its place. " I wish I knew whom he was with yesterday. She was fair, and so much prettier than I am ; " she stopped before the glass and looked critically at her own face. " Oh yes, she was much prettier." She smoothed her hair, and unsnapped her beads—her favourite beads. " I will never wear them again," she thought. " I remember he said he did not like them, and I will never do anything I fancy he does not like, even if I never see him again as long as I live," she added, in a vain attempt to keep back her tears ; and with a feeling of half-shame she sat down again, while she felt them steal softly down her cheeks. Then there came a double knock at the street door, and hastily brushing them away, she listened for a moment almost breathlessly. The next moment, Richard Brandford entered the room.

" Mr. Brandford ! " she exclaimed. " Why, I thought you had gone to Spa," and the tears she could not keep back, again rolled, she did not know why, down her face. " Jack is so ill," she said hurriedly, as an excuse for them.

" Oh," he said, opening his brown eyes very wide, and looking in surprise at the flushed and frightened face, " I thought you were very unhappy at my departure," he said, sitting down.

" No," she pouted helplessly, but laughing through her tears ; " only I thought you had gone without wishing me good-bye."

“ Well, and if I had ? ”

“ Nothing—oh, nothing at all,” more helplessly still.

“ Tell me about Jack,” he said, and she told him what the doctor had said.

“ He ought to go abroad.”

“ Papa could not afford it,” Polly exclaimed, her breath almost taken away by the very idea.

“ Well then, to the seaside, Hastings, or some warm sheltered place.”

“ Do you know mamma and I have been wondering if we could get him down to Benthwaite, to Aunt Maria ? ” but Richard Brandford shook his head.

“ Too early,” he said, “ and too bracing for him just yet. It would do in the hot weather. I wish I could take him with me to Spa.”

“ Oh ! ”

“ You see my mother isn’t well, and I shouldn’t know what to do with a little fellow all alone.”

“ Oh, no, of course not, but it is very good of you even to think of it.” He was indeed wonderful, she thought, and she looked at him with tears in her eyes.

“ Don’t cry again,” he said, gently, with just a dash of authority in his voice that told instantly. “ He’ll be better soon. You must get him off to the sea. By the way, I have a whole box of books ready to be sent off to you, and there are some Jack will like too. You can keep them till I send for them, if you don’t mind. There are some wildly miserable love-stories for Mrs. Dawson among them,” he laughed.

“ How good of you to think of it,” she answered, the smiles breaking over her face.

“ And yet, you thought I’d gone without saying good-bye,” he said in a reproachful tone that had a sweetness in it to her, showing as it did that he had never meant to do so.

“ Yes,” she answered helplessly again. Then he was silent, and looked at her for a moment with a smile upon his face that vexed her; she did not know why, and yet she was quite happy again. “ I saw you yesterday with

such a very pre' ty girl," she said abruptly, determined to have that little affair cleared up, now she had the opportunity.

"Oh, did you ; it must have been Clare Clayton." He knew perfectly that she was dying to ask him a dozen questions, but he had not the faintest intention of answering them.

"Who is she ?"

"The daughter of some old friends who live not far from here."

"Do you like her ?"

"Yes, I suppose so, pretty well."

"But she is very pretty ?"

"Very."

"Oh, and *you* think so too ?" in an uneasy voice.

"Yes, I always admire a pretty face when I see one."

"And fair ones most?" putting her head a little one side.

"Well, I don't know," he said, standing up and looking down at the gipsyfied one before him, and at the dark, sleepy eyes full of light and love, the depth of which he did not then comprehend. "Perhaps I admire yours most," he added a little mockingly. He seldom if ever showed what he felt, and Polly had not the slightest idea of the thoughts that passed through his mind, as he teased and tantalised her.

"I don't believe you do," she said, ready to break down and cry again ; "I believe you think I am dreadfully ugly ;" and in her eagerness, she exaggerated her belief for the sake of wringing from him a contradiction, which, even if forced, she knew must be grateful to her ears.

"I am sure I don't," he said, beginning dimly to comprehend that he was paining her ; "I think you are a very pretty Polly."

"I won't be spoken to in that way," she replied, angry at last ; "I won't be called a pretty Polly—it makes me feel like a parrot!"

He turned away impatiently, not knowing how to soothe her. All those little ways in which a man can flatter and minister to a woman's vanity, and yet not compromise himself—all those little attentions which she accepts so readily and prizes so much, were beyond him, and if they had not been, he would have despised them, and perhaps the woman too who found them necessary to her happiness. She sat down with her hands folded and waited for him to speak. He must say something, she thought, for he had been rather rude, not that she was angry really. Oh no, only it was a peg on which to hang a quarrel—just a little quarrel—out of which had Robert Welch been the other party she would have come so triumphantly. For a quarrel would lead to a reconciliation, and a reconciliation would lead him to say something which her heart would remember, when all the troubles of that day were forgotten. She knew he would never shower love-words on any woman, however devoted his heart might be to her, and what right had she to expect any at all from him. She did not, only she did expect—she did not quite know what. He stood carelessly turning over the leaves of a book, quite unconscious that anything at all was expected from him; then he turned and looked at her face. It was a very sweet one, he thought, and there was something strange in it to-day, a longing, eager, almost sorrowful look, that seemed to draw her to him. He did not quite understand himself, for that little pettish girl was exercising almost a fascination over him.

"She is a dear little thing," he thought; "a man will never perhaps wonder at her wit or cleverness, but many a one might love her for her simplicity and tenderness." Then he said, enquiringly, "Well?"

"Well?" she echoed, poutingly.

"Why I believe you are offended because I called you a pretty Polly. I shall call you an ugly one next time, if that is how you take my compliments."

"I don't care what you called me," she answered,

laughing, forced suddenly and prematurely to forego all idea of reconciliation after a quarrel that had never taken place. Then he asked—

“What is the matter with you to-day? Is it Jack that is worrying you?”

“Yes,” she answered, “it’s Jack—and other things; it’s very easy to get worried.”

“It is, indeed, Polly; don’t let yourself be worried more than you can help. Of course you are anxious about Jack, that is natural, but don’t get worried about unnecessary things, it is the greatest possible mistake in life.” Then he looked at his watch, sent a good-bye message to Mrs. Dawson, who was not well enough to appear, and rose to depart.

“I suppose I shall never see you again,” Polly said, not daring to raise her eyes, and looking flushed and miserable, but more than ever like a crumpled rose.

“Yes, you will; I shall be back early in the year.” He looked down at her and saw that she was trembling, and almost shrinking from his gaze; then on an impulse he said, “Shall I write to you now and then, Polly?”

She looked up with such a sudden flash of happiness in her face that he could not mistake it, and he began wonderingly to feel that this girl, whom he had teased and patronised, almost educated, was in love with him. He was not a conceited man; love was a thing he concerned himself little about, and he stood there surprised and silent, gravely feeling the truth of that fact which Polly thought she was so successfully hiding.

Then he took both her hands in his, and looked long, and almost tenderly, at the downcast face. “You will write back again?”

“Oh yes,” she said; “good-bye, Mr. Brandford.”

“Good-bye, Polly; don’t call me Mr. Brandford next time. I hope Jack will be better soon. I shan’t forget you.” He just touched her cheek lightly with his hand, and he was gone.

He turned back before he was out of sight, and

took a last look at the dingy house. "It is a dreary frame to a very sweet picture," he said to himself, and he went on his way with a strange puzzled feeling, wondering why it was that he so often found himself, almost unconsciously, thinking of Polly. He began to realise too, that he was a very lonely man in the world ; he had no brothers, no unmarried sisters, no one who really cared for him. He had never felt the want of human affection, but he thought, once or twice that night, that he had never known how precious a thing it was. There was something restful too in thinking of that little girl at Kensington. He had never found it wearisome to talk to her, and she was very soft and feminine ; she was not clever and witty, obliging him to keep his intellect awake, or dazzling him with her brightness, but only a pretty home-like woman pleading to be loved. "I'll write to her soon," he said, "I wonder what she will have to say for herself ; she is capable of developing into a very sweet character." Surely Richard Brandford's eyes were wandering away from his world of books and sunshine ?

CHAPTER XV.

TOO LATE.



OLLY, I have come to ask a great favour," Margaret Albury said, unexpectedly appearing the next evening. "We are all going away for a month, and I have come to ask if you and Jack will go with us?" she said the words in her usual practical, rather hard voice, but there was on her face an expression that was almost sweet. Polly started with surprise.

"Go away, where to?"

"We think of going to the Isle of Wight. Of course it will be very stupid and dull, and we shall hate each other at the end of a fortnight, no doubt, but the sky is broad enough to cover us both, and the change will amuse Jack." She was careful only to say that it would amuse him.

"It is very, very kind of you," Polly began.

"Oh no, it isn't. I hate being told I am very, very kind," she said snappishly. "I think you'll amuse me, and if you think I shall amuse you, and Jack, why come—poor Jack, you don't think I should be very dreadful for a month, do you?" and she put her hand down on the boy's head.

"No," he said gratefully, "I don't—besides, I like you," he added simply. "Only I don't feel as if I could move anywhere, it's such a bother," and he turned wearily round on the sofa. He was always on the sofa now.

"Miss Albury, it is very kind of you," Polly said thoughtfully and gravely, "and if papa will consent it will do Jack a world of good, but I want to ask you

something. I am very, very grateful to you, but you know there's poor dear mamma. She would be so afraid to be left here all alone, and she really can't be left, I assure you, and it does'nt matter a bit about me."

"Well? I am afraid we could not manage three of you; you see there will be a party of ourselves."

"Oh, I know, I know. I didn't mean that, but if you could take Jack and mamma instead of me"—entreatingly. "It would do her a world of good."

"No, I couldn't," answered Miss Albury unmistakably. "I should have to be agreeable and polite, and I couldn't. Fancy inviting a girl on a visit, and the girl asking you to take her mother instead. What a little simpleton you are, Polly."

"I beg your pardon," said Polly.

"You needn't do that. It is rather nice of you to think of your mother, only don't you see, Polly dear, I know what to do with a girl, and I could bully you if I felt bad-tempered, but I should have to behave myself with your mother, and I detest behaving myself. Now try and manage it, and let me know to-morrow. Good-bye." And she went, leaving Polly in a state of doubt and anxiety. It would of course be everything to get Jack away, if it could be managed.

"You would like it, wouldn't you, Jack dear?"

"Yes. I don't much care," he added wearily. Jack cared for nothing now. "I should like to be with you anywhere, Polly dear, but I don't want to go away without mamma, you know."

"It is difficult," sighed Polly. "We must think it well over. I don't want to go away from poor mamma either, still it is a chance for you, Jack darling."

"Yes," he nodded, "go and play a bit, Polly. I like to hear you play," he said, "I always like to hear you play while it is getting dark."

Then Polly, going to the piano, let her hands stray over the keys, playing snatches of she hardly knew what, for her mind was not in her music. It would

be everything to get Jack away, she thought, and she knew that she herself would be the best person to go with him, that she understood him, and could wait upon him and nurse him, and do anything in the world for him. But then, she had never left her mother in her life, and Mrs. Dawson was not at all likely to like being left, though of course she would consent to it when she knew it would be for Jack's good. Polly knew her poor, dear mother would at once see the necessity of it; but what she would suffer in a dozen trivial ways she could not bear to think. "Poor, dear mamma!" she sighed. "She doesn't even like going upstairs in the dark, or sitting alone in the evening when papa is not at home. And she'll have no one to talk to all day, and no one to take her out. I shall be so unhappy thinking of her, but if Jack only comes home better—Jack," looking round at the boy uneasily dozing on the sofa—"Oh, Jack dear, did I wake you?"

"No," he answered, "only I don't feel well. Do you think father will be home to-night?"

"I don't know, dear, he may; he said 'in two or three days' time' in his letter, and that was the day before yesterday." She left the piano and went over to him, sitting down on the floor by the sofa, and taking his two hot, thin hands in hers. The twilight was fast coming, but she could see how his eyes flashed, and his cheeks burned with the fever of weakness. Her heart almost sank as she looked at him, and a dread crept over her lest it was too late for sea, or change, or anything in this wide world to do him good.

"Jack," she said, suddenly, almost without noticing what her lips said, she felt so keenly what was in her heart, "I am so glad I took you to a doctor, and oh if you only get well we will be so happy."

"Yes," he answered, listlessly. Then after a long silence he spoke. "Polly," he said, "do you remember when we talked about the shining city?" but she only nodded her head, and stooped down till her cheek almost touched his forehead. "I know where it is

now ; Mr. Dale told me. I think I shall go there soon," he added, simply.

"Oh, no ; oh, no!" she cried, "you will soon get well. The sea will do you good, Jack, darling, my own little brother," she said, clinging to him, while the sad, sad tears ran down her cheeks. "You will get well by the sea," she went on desperately. "Only think, Jack, darling, of our being there together, and seeing the tide come in, and the big waves creeping up the shore. You would like that, wouldn't you?"

"No, I don't care much about it," he answered, and there was no response in his tone ; but he kissed her, and put his arm round her neck, and played with the smooth dark plaits of her hair. Then, after another pause, he spoke again. "Polly," he said, huskily, "do you think much about God?"

She almost screamed at the suddenness of the question. "What do you mean, Jack?" she said, looking up eagerly at him.

"Why, Mr. Dale has told me so much about him lately ; I did not know half so much before." Then breaking off abruptly he said, "Go and sing, Polly—go and sing, I don't want to talk."

She rose and almost tottered to the piano, and hesitated, for she did not know what to sing ; all songs seemed out of place. Then half shyly, half awkwardly, she began the first sacred air, an old Sunday-school hymn, which came to her remembrance, but before she had got to the end of the first two lines she broke down miserably. "Oh, Jack, I can't—oh, Jack, I can't," and covering her face with her hands, she began to sob bitterly.

Then he rose, and feebly went to her. "Polly," he said, "what is the matter with you to-night? you do nothing but cry. Is it about me?" She only gave a little quick nod. "Are you unhappy because you think I am going to the shining city?"—but she only replied as before. "I am not," he said, clinging to her and nestling his head down into her lap, "I am not

a bit. You'll come too some day, and all of you, you know. You are not afraid!" he exclaimed, looking up suddenly, not knowing how much hidden meaning his own words held. "Polly, you are not *afraid*, are you?"

"Afraid!" She did not know herself, she only dimly understood the question. "I cannot tell you, Jack," she said humbly; "I do not know myself. Go back to the sofa, dear, and let me sit quietly in the easy chair a little while," and leaving the music-stool, she sat gravely considering Jack's question. And in the twilight, that sad, wistful twilight, which seemed loth to darken over Jack's pale face, there came to her a first vague yearning for a knowledge of holier things, an indescribable feeling which was not satisfied till long, long days had passed.

She was not what is called a religious girl; it was scarcely possible she could have been, considering what had been her bringing-up, and what were her surroundings. As yet life was but beginning for her, and though a storm was resting on it now, it was only one of the dark spring clouds, which, however black, do not stay the summer's coming. Moreover, Polly, with her capacity for happiness, her appreciation of the bright and beautiful, and secret cravings for all the world seemed capable of giving, had waited almost impatiently for that world to open for her; but to-night she turned for a moment on its threshold to cast one half-frightened glance towards that strange city, at the gates of which Jack was almost standing, but of which she had scarcely ever thought at all.

She heard her mother's step presently, and roused herself.

"Is that you, mamma," Jack said, "I am so glad you have come. Sit down here in the twilight, Polly is going to sing;" and as she passed he put up his two hands, and drawing his mother down, kissed her.

"Very well, dear," his mother answered, "I will

sit here and listen. I like to hear Polly sing." Polly's voice was one everybody liked to hear. She was more successful this time, as her fingers wandered half dreamily over the keys, and her sweet tones rose at first a little tremblingly, then clearer and firmer, yet softer and sweeter even than usual, till at last she forgot her mother listening behind, and Jack lying uneasily on the sofa, and thought only of the burden of the words to which her lips were giving utterance. Neither of her hearers spoke, and she went on and on till the twilight had almost developed into darkness and the shadows had quite shrouded Jack's quiet face. Presently she heard unheedingly a footstep on the pavement outside, heard it stop, and the slight creaking of the gate, then a key turned in the lock of the street door, yet still she did not leave off till her father entered the room and stood half hesitatingly before them.

"What are you doing?" he asked, and he seemed almost shivering in the summer night, and his voice sounded strange. "Why are you all in the dark? I do wish you would not waste your time singing Methodist hymns, Polly. How is Jack?" Then the gas was lighted, and Polly and her mother stood up and looked at the traveller, not with eager greetings, and smiles, and caresses, as most men are welcomed in their families after a journey, but half-fearing, half-uncertain.

"We wondered what had become of you," Mrs. Dawson said, "How is your brother? Is he better?"

"Yes, he's better," he answered shortly, evidently not wishing to be cross-examined. "How is Jaek?" And he looked at the boy eagerly, and anxiously, and went up to him and took his hands.

"How is Uncle Fred?" Jack asked. He dropped the boy's hands and turned away; then, as if in reply to his wife's still unanswered question rather than to Jack's, he said, "He's better, much better; he's gone abroad again."

"Where has he gone? he couldn't have been very

bad, if he could go abroad again so soon. Where has he gone?"

"I don't know," he answered crossly. "Men don't pry into each other's movements, even if they are brothers. He has gone abroad again, my dear. We shall hear from him soon, no doubt," and a long silence ensued, broken at last by the lawyer asking again, "Tell me how is Jack?" This time Polly answered.

"I don't think he's better, papa, and Jack doesn't think he's better himself, and I have been to see a doctor, and he says Jack wants change, and good nourishment, and all kinds of things, he does indeed," and Polly clasped her hands, as was her way when excited. The lawyer made no more objections.

"He shall have anything he likes, he knows I would do anything for him, don't you, Jack?"

"Miss Albury has asked us to go to the sea-side with her, to the Isle of Wight," Polly said, doubting very much.

"Well, well, we'll see about it. You'll soon be better, you'll soon be better, Jack, we'll do all we can for you." There was a change in Henry Dawson's manner, and he hung over the boy, as Polly had never seen him do before. It almost seemed, as if something had really touched him at last, and he was waking to a sense of his son's condition. "You know I would do anything in the world for you, don't you, Jack?"

"Yes," answered Jack, gratefully but languidly. Then Mr. Dawson said he had some letters to write, and went to his study, and Mrs. Dawson went up-stairs to look for something, and Jack and Polly were once more alone. But the former said not a word, and so the minutes went by, until the lawyer called to Polly from his study.

"What is Robert Welch's address in Liverpool?" he asked.

"Are you going to write to him?" Polly ventured to inquire as she gave it.

"Yes," he answered, "I am going to tell him that my brother has gone abroad, and can't be bothered with letters at present. He must send them through me at any rate," he added. "There, that will do, my dear; there's the letter, you can send it to the post. And now go back to your brother, and don't worry me any more about the sea-side, and things for Jack; you shall have anything you like, and go anywhere, if it will do him good," he said, still nervous and almost timid. He seemed to have left all his suavity and blandness behind him, and to be altogether changed.

So Polly went back, and sat down opposite the sofa, wondering about what had happened, and what had made her father so strange, and his face so careworn. Perhaps he had quarrelled with his brother, she thought, though that seemed unlikely, for he was not a man given to quarrelling, or apt to take offence. One great load her father's return had lifted from her heart. He did seem at last to realise that something must be done for Jack, and she tried to hope it was not too late. She looked up at him. He was staring about uneasily and vacantly, and the expression on his face startled her.

"Jack," she said, not wishing to frighten him, and trying to speak calmly, "What a good thing it was you went to Mr. Dale's, was it not?" she knew that he liked talking about Mr. Dale, and generally brightened up at the mention of his name, but he only nodded a little weak nod, with his faded eyes fixed far off on another corner of the room; while a book he held in his hand fell helplessly from his clasp to the floor. "Jack! what is the matter?" and she went to him, and knelt down by his side. "Jack!" she said again, with a sort of desperate foreshadowing of what was to come. "Oh, Jack, my darling, do speak, and kiss me just once more," putting her cheek down to his face.

The boy smiled faintly, and pressed his lips gently to it; and then she raised his head, and saw that

expression stealing over his face which even she, inexperienced as she was, could not mistake.

“Oh, merciful Father!” she said, in a despair that became supplication, “it must be death,” and she put her arms round him, as if to keep him yet a little longer on earth, and called to her father in his study. “Father, Jack is dying!”

He came instantly, with alarm and dread in his face.

“Dying!” he exclaimed, and he pushed Polly’s clinging arms away from their hold; “dying, oh no, Jack, my boy, Jack!” and he raised him as she had done. “Jack—look, he’s smiling—Jack, look up, old fellow, and you shall go into the country—you shall go next week, you shall indeed, and spend all the money I have in the world if you will only get strong. You know who it is, don’t you, Jack? It’s your father, your poor father, who thinks of you more than anything in the world. Get away, Polly, don’t you see he can’t breathe? Ah, he’s opening his eyes. He’ll be all right in a moment, it’s only a fainting fit. Jack, my boy. There, he’s better now,” as the smile which had come when he kissed his sister crept into the boy’s face again. “He’s smiling at his father, his poor old father, who works, and strives, and saves for him—only for him.”

But the boy’s head drooped down upon his chest. “Move back!” Henry Dawson almost shouted in his despair. “Ring the bell and send for a doctor, send at once—or go; do you hear? Oh! Jack, Jack.” The smile on Jack’s lips was still there, there as long as those who loved him might look upon his quiet face, but the waiting eyes were closed for ever on the world.

“Father,” said Polly gently, for she was stunned and tearless, “it’s no use, Jack’s dead.”

Then they crowded into the room—the servant, and the doctor she had fetched in haste from the corner of the street, and poor Mrs. Dawson, weeping and wringing her hands, and calling in vain for her boy,—crowded in

to find the father crouched on his knees, with his face hidden in his hands, before the dead body of his son.

"Henry," his wife said, sobbingly. "It's too much for him," she said, turning to Polly, who could not cry, but stood like a statue, motionless and rigid; "it's too much for him."

Then the lawyer raised his head. "Oh, Jack!" he moaned. "It's no use—too late—too late."

CHAPTER XVI.

POLLY IS LEFT ALONE.



CHANGE came over the dingy house after Jack's death. The grief altered, though it did not soften Henry Dawson. He lost much of his suavity, and became peevish and morose, hoarding still more, if possible, than ever, but seeming to do so mechanically, without zest or reason, as if merely from the force of habit. He was rather less petty, perhaps; less scrupulous in saving a penny, more so in saving a shilling. Mrs. Dawson and Polly noticed that he always shut the door of his study now, when he retired to it, instead of leaving it open as heretofore; and oh, the loneliness of the hours he spent there none but himself ever knew. For years he had soothed himself with the reflection, that it was his anxiety for Jack's future, which was the key to all his selfishness and greediness, now he could do so no longer. He had striven and plotted and planned—nay, worse, and had pleaded to himself as a reason his love for Jack, love which allowed him to die in his childhood, rather than make an effort to save him, which would have involved any sacrifice of his dreams for his manhood. He had really cared for Jack, but it had been after his own fashion; he had been an unfortunate man in one thing, he had never valued human affection, nor tried to gain it, and, yet without knowing it, had felt its want. Even as a young man, he had not been in love with his wife, and had never thought it worth while to try to gain her regard. It might have been different, perhaps, had Mrs. Dawson been companionable, which she was not, but only a good-hearted woman, without much

education or power of understanding. He had found no rest for his thoughts, no little haven for any affection of which his nature might have been capable. Thus he had from sheer mental loneliness, unconscious loneliness, merged every feeling in excessive worldliness, till that which had been the fault of his youth became the vice of his manhood. He had softened a little in favour of his son, for he had found in him an excuse for his own conduct; and any love he had had beyond his ruling passion, he lavished upon him; but still he was not less lonely.

But the death of his son did not tell upon him much outwardly. It made him dogged and silent, but he continued in the line of conduct for which he had no longer an excuse, even to himself. There had been only one little evidence of feeling after the first shock, and that was when he took the child's religious books—a Bible and one or two others—and placed them on the corner of a shelf in his study. He never read a line of them, he never opened them even, but now and then he stood looking at them sorrowfully, almost reverently, and then turned fretfully and impatiently away.

“He might have had feathers on the horses' heads,” wept poor Mrs. Dawson on the day of Jack's funeral, as she took a miserable look at the dismal little procession from a corner of the window-blind. “He was the only boy we had——” But Polly soothed her, Polly whose grief had no tears left in which to express itself.

“What can it matter, dear mamma; what difference can it make?”

“But oh,” sobbed Mrs. Dawson, “to think he will be left all alone in the cemetery to-night, and I was *so* fond of him.”

The trouble told sadly on Mrs. Dawson, she fretted and grieved over her loss miserably, and with a passionate vehemence that would not be soothed or comforted, and the health and sight, which she had lost

before Jack's death, never came back. She never again took an interest in the sentimental stories in which she had once delighted. Her face became thinner, and her eyes more dim, and she forgot to glorify herself on the departed splendour of her youthful days, and ceased to fret at the petty privations of her every-day life, or to sigh for things which were "so pretty," or if she did still sometimes long for little dainties and luxuries which were beyond her reach, she did not childishly express her longing for them.

Her husband never noticed the alteration in her, for it is strange, how far off we often are from those who have known us all our lives, even if we live in the same house with them. But Polly did. Oh yes, Polly saw it, and she devoted every hour to studying her mother's comfort, and to gratifying her little whims and fancies, and waited humbly with aching heart, and dreading eyes, for what fresh sorrow the future might have in store for her. Her mother drew very close to her in those latter days, for she liked being petted and spoilt and made much of, and in all matters of feeling her husband had always been a cypher. She had therefore only her daughter to look to, and she gave her in that time of her helplessness, and blindness, a grateful love and child-like devotion, that made Polly dread each morrow as it came, knowing how soon one of them must bring the ending of it all.

"Dear," Mrs. Dawson said one day, when her daughter's watchful eyes had seen that a pillow was not quite comfortable, and her careful hands had placed a shawl over the thin shoulders which did not feel the warmth of the July sun, "you have been a good girl, a very kind, good girl to me; you'll be sorry if I die, won't you?"

But Polly could not answer.

"You'll come in for all my pretty things then, you know," she continued, with a touch of her old vanity. "I haven't many, but there's the brooch you gave me, and the handkerchief your Aunt Maria worked——"

"Oh, dear mamma, pray don't!" and she sank on her knees by the sofa.

"Your poor father will only have you left," she went on. "Be kind to him, dear," speaking thoughtfully. "I don't think he has meant to deny us things, or to neglect us," and she remembered, with a touch of old tenderness, that she had been inclined to care for him very much in the days when she had first known him among the mountains of Benthwaite, and would have done much more than merely care for him, had he not despised, and refused to recognise all affection.

"Perhaps not, mamma," Polly answered sadly; "he has not understood the value of all that he has left undone."

After that day only the dim eyes following Polly's movements, and a little stroking motion of the thin white hands, expressed Mrs. Dawson's grateful love for her daughter's tenderness. A week or two later, ere the August sun had tinted the ripening corn with its gold, she was at rest for ever, and Jack was no longer alone in the cemetery. Polly and her father were all that remained of the household in the dingy house.

It seemed to the former, as if, with her mother, she lost the last link—almost the last hope—of affection the world held for her. There was not a soul else save Robert Welch, who to the best of her knowledge ever wasted a thought upon her. With her mother, that childish, frivolous, lovable mother, to whose vain little longings and aspirations she would never listen more, and whose dim eyes were closed for ever, much of her own life seemed to die. Childhood and girlhood appeared suddenly to have ebbed away, with the two beings in whose sight they had been spent, and to have left her lonely and objectless. She stood dazed, scarcely believing in her own sorrow, stunned, and almost hardened by her grief on the first morning of her entire loneliness in the dingy house—the morning after her mother's funeral. It was so still and terrible as she

walked through the empty rooms, though the light, which had been excluded for the last few days, glared in with all the heat and glitter of August. She shaded her eyes, and shuddered as she thought how that same sunshine was glaring down on the grave she had stood by yesterday ; then she put her hands over her face and cried out to herself, "Oh Jack, Jack, oh dear, dear mother." To think she would never see Jack turning over the leaves of his book again ; never see her mother half-piteously, half-childishly, look up through her steel-rimmed glasses ; never listen for their footsteps, or hear their voices, or touch their hands for one single second again ; not though she gave her own life to purchase the boon, not if she wept out her heart, not if she could offer all the world held, not for anything under heaven.

"It seems as if all my life is buried with them," she said. "And I am so useless now. There is nothing left for me to do." Then there flashed across her the remembrance of her mother's words concerning her father. "I wonder if he would be angry, if I went and wished him good-bye before he goes out this morning," she thought. "Poor mamma's only wish was that I should be kind to him, but how can I, when he will hardly give me the chance of even speaking to him ?" She went downstairs and waited in the dining-room, until he should come out of the study on his way to the street-door, but it was a long time before she heard him get up from his writing-table. They had had breakfast together, but neither of them had spoken beyond a passing word. That was natural enough, perhaps, though it was no exception to the general rule, on the first morning of their absolute loneliness—a loneliness which even the lawyer felt, Polly saw that. His face was almost stern in its careworn gravity, as he sat staring blankly before him, and Polly had had no heart to break the silence.

She rose when he came out of his study ready to leave the house for the day, and looked at him doubtfully, then almost awkwardly she went up to him.

“Papa,” she said, “can I do anything for you now, or while you are out?”

“No thank you,” he answered coldly. She waited a moment, then she put her hand timidly upon his coat-sleeve.

“Papa dear,” she said softly, almost lovingly, “If I can be of any help or comfort to you, you will let me, won’t you?” But he only nodded, and shook her off, and she had no courage to say more. He turned back as he was leaving the house.

“Polly,” he said, “there are some things of your mother’s, dresses, and so on, you had better take possession of them, they will be useful to you. Take them away, my dear.” The last words were only said mechanically, there was no warmth or affection in them, and Polly sighed, as she watched him go.

“I shall never be any good to him,” she said hopelessly, “never, I feel that. I will take away poor mamma’s things presently, perhaps he cannot bear the sight of them.”

She went up-stairs, and one by one gathered together her mother’s garments from out of the drawers where they had been placed, smoothed and carefully folded by the hands that would never touch them more. They smelt of the lavender that Robert Welch had sent only a month ago, and she stood still for a moment, thinking of the evening when Mrs. Dawson had first hinted to him to bring home flowers and good things from Liverpool. Then with one long, loving look at the things, as if to remember for ever how they had been put away by the hands that would touch them no more, she stooped and took them out one by one—the solitary silk dress, and the bits of ribbon and finery that had been so dear to her mother’s heart. “Oh, mamma, oh, dear, dear mamma!” she cried out in her bitterness as she put them lovingly away in a trunk.

It was soon over. Poor Mrs. Dawson had had but few things to call her own, no trinkets, not even a watch, no delicate laces or rare shawls or cambric

handkerchiefs, only some half-worn clothes, and those few in number. Polly sat down for a moment, when it was done, in the room she called her own—a meagre uncomfortable room, like the rest in the house, for Polly had no knick-knacks to put about, no little show of daintily bound books, nothing to brighten up her room and make it specially her own. No one had ever given her little luxuries, and she had never had money to buy them.

“I wish I had something of mamma’s to remain in my sight always, and remind me of her,” she said, as she looked round her barren nest. Then suddenly she remembered the desk, the little clumsy desk which her mother had prized ever since the days of her girlhood at Benthwaite. “I don’t think papa values it,” she thought, “I should like to have it always on my table, and see it every morning and evening.” She went into the other room and looked at it, lifted the lid, and saw the little packets of letters and the few unused sheets of writing paper, and shut it down quickly. “I can’t, I can’t look at it yet,” she cried, “and oh, poor papa would perhaps like that one thing to remind him of her,” and she left it. But Polly soon had it, for in the evening when the silent tea was finished, the lawyer turned round as he was entering his study, and asked hesitatingly and sadly—

“Did you do what I told you; did you take your poor mother’s things, my dear?”

“Yes, papa, I took them all except the little desk. I thought you might like—”

“No, no, take that too, it all reminds me—it is so sad to be reminded,” he added, in a weak helpless tone.

So Polly took the little desk and put it on her toilet table. She seldom opened it; she never disturbed the contents, “it shall remain, for ever and ever, just as mamma left it,” she said, and so it was. But it was always in the same place to remind her daily of the relationship that, save in her thoughts and memory, she could know no more.

And then Polly's life alone, for she saw so little of her father, it might be called alone, in the dingy house began, and it seemed as if nothing in the world awaited her.

But a little of the darkness was soon to be swept away, and the first person to let in any light was Margaret Albury. She came to see Polly as soon as she thought it wise to do so, and was gentle almost in her manner to the grave little girl she found sitting alone in the old arm-chair, which had ever been her refuge.

"Poor little Polly; I am glad to see you again;" and she sat down and looked at her. Margaret Albury, with all her sarcasm and sharpness, had a keen sense of beauty, and the soft outline of Polly's face always had a charm for her. "Life is not such a very delightful thing, is it?" she asked bitterly.

"No, it is not," Polly answered.

"And you must be very lonely?" she went on. "What do you do with yourself all day, sit and think of your mother and Jack?" Then Polly looked up reproachfully. No one had any right to mention the names that for evermore were sacred.

"No," she answered, coldly. A strange touch of feeling came into Margaret Albury's voice.

"Don't look at me as if I had done your dead some harm by mentioning their names," she said. "Don't let them pass out of your life, dear, keep them in it while you can. The rest will not be so hard to bear if you do that. It is a barbarous custom, that of never speaking of those that are gone. It originated with savages, who were afraid of saying a dead man's name for fear of raising his ghost. "Don't be afraid of talking of them as if death were a disgrace," she went on bitterly. "Speak of them whenever you can, or whenever you think your hearer will listen with reverence or sympathy."

"But if one can't," said Polly, her eyes filling with tears. "If one can't—"

"You will learn ; it will come, and you must try. There is a great virtue in grinning and bearing," she added in her old sarcastic manner. "I believe one can bear anything quietly, no matter what one feels, if one only tries, and it is a duty to try. One can't help crying out when the blow is struck, but he is a coward indeed who does not endure the after-pain in silence, or does not try to do so. So you will gain control, Polly. It will come, though I know well enough that for a long time, even if your lips are smiling, your heart will be sad. But, dear, you will get to see how happy you were in having had their love, and how blessed you are in remembering it. I don't see why you should not say and feel that they love you still. It is always twelve by the clock that stops at noon, you know."

"But I want them ; I miss them so sorely. I have nothing to do, and no one to love me," Polly said, helplessly, the tears streaming down her face.

"Forget yourself, and your own life and longings, in other people, in their lives and longings, then you will miss them less, though loving them the same, and you can always find something to do. There is your father." Miss Albury's voice was almost scornful as she mentioned his name, for she had no love for the lawyer.

"He won't let me. He never liked us to take much notice of him, and he would not thank me whatever I did for him."

"You must not do your duty for the sake of the thanks you may get, you foolish little thing," she answered angrily. "Do what you can for him, whether he knows it or not, or thanks you or not. You should do right for its own sake ; not for what you are going to get by it. I must say I never feel much respect for those worthy Christians who do their duty, and put into the plate on Sunday, because they think they may get heaven by it. I doubt if they will," she added quickly.

"But I have nothing to do, and no one cares for me," Polly said again.

"You can find plenty to do if you look for it, and

you won't find it difficult to make people love you, Polly dear," Margaret Albury answered; and her voice was softer as she said the last words. "You must not think of yourself, nor merely seek love to satisfy your human craving for it, but be satisfied with giving love. You will find plenty of people glad and thankful for it; poor folk, and sick ones, and little children."

"But I have no money for these."

"Money!" she said contemptuously. "You can help them without money. Love them and work for them, and enter into their joys and sorrows. Care for them, and they will care for you. You will understand sorrow now that you have been in its land and learnt its language, and will know how to feel for people. You will be better for having known sorrow; all people are, I think, especially young people; it sometimes prevents them from getting self-centred. Girls are often a little unfeeling—a sorrow wakes them up, it starts them and sets them going. I know this sounds very brutal, but it's true; though I don't mean that you were unfeeling, Polly dear. But what a sermon I'm preaching. Quite a new line, isn't it, for me to come out as an apostle, preaching love and sympathy," she said suddenly, in her old rasping voice. "I feel like a doctor prescribing the physic I wouldn't take for worlds. And I don't love people overmuch myself, and they don't love me, I'm thankful to say; I should be nicely bored if they did. I like preaching to you, Polly; it's quite amusing to advise you to be a pattern of virtue, without even troubling myself to be one as an example; but I detest examples, and trust I shall never be one, and never cultivate my conscience to such an extent as to cease to enjoy my own shortcomings." Then she got up to go. "I have talked you to death," she said. "Are you longing to get rid of me?"

"No; and I was thinking ——"

"Then, you were not listening to my sermon, you rude child?"

"I was thinking," said Polly, not noticing her interruption, and speaking in a soft, grateful voice, "that you were very, very kind to Jack, and I should like to"—and she burst into tears again, and struggled with them hopelessly. "Oh, I will try, I will try," she sobbed. "I will learn to bear it, but it is so new yet, you see. I can't think of it some —"

"I know you can't," Margaret Albury said tenderly, and she took Polly into her arms and kissed her. "I don't want to make a stoic of you; you could not be one, poor thing. Your grief must have its natural fling; but the self-control will come, and you will be better for it. I am glad you think I was kind to Jack, dear; but I was not. He was a dear, little fellow, and I merely followed the bent of my own inclination in coming to see him, and inviting you down to the sea," and she remembered, though Polly did not, that she had refused to have Mrs. Dawson as a guest instead of Polly, and Margaret Albury's conscience was not quite as easy-going as she boasted. "I wanted your company, so it was kindness to myself, rather than to you, that made me invite you. Well, good-bye. Next time I feel in a moralising humour," she said sharply, "I will stay at home. Good-bye, again."

Polly went with her to the street door, and stood watching her disappear, for she had only the dull empty room to return to; and, as yet, she was not able to read, and find an interest in books again. And as she was about to shut the door, the postman came and put a letter into the hand she held out, wondering from whom it could be, for Polly had so few letters. Her heart stood still as she saw it, and she carried it back to the dining-room, and sat down in her chair again. It was a letter written on thin paper, with a foreign postmark, and directed in a thick, indistinct hand. She looked at it vacantly, while the remembrance of the past, which had been sleeping during her recent troubles, came back with all its old sweet force. "It is from Richard

Brandford," she said to herself, as she nervously unfolded the one sheet of paper it contained; but the words danced before her eyes and she could not see them. "Oh," she exclaimed, "if it had only come before. I was so happy when I saw him last, and yet I did not know it."

Part II.

CHAPTER I.

A BLINK OF BLUE.



HE months went by until the winter had gone, and spring came again, and it was nearly a year since Jack had died.

And Polly, taking Margaret Albury's words to heart, struggled after self-control until it gradually became natural to her, and if her smiles were not as frequent as they once were, there was more sweetness in the grave half-sad expression that was often on her face. She altered, even more than she had in the months after she first knew Richard Brandford, and far more imperceptibly to herself. She had from necessity to make a world for herself, and she made it. At first, life was miserably dull and lonely; it was lonely still, but it was no longer dull. Perhaps, some girls left entirely to their own devices, and with the longing for friends and admiration, and the appreciation of affection which is in all feminine natures, and the lingering vanity which is in most of them, would have filled up the blank days by occupation unlike Polly's. But the lawyer's daughter shrank, not only from all that was bad and unwomanly, but from all that was frivolous, when she once recognised its frivolity. The autumn months after her mother's death had been bitter and wretched—the first griefs of our lives, though they may not be the most lasting, are yet for the time the keenest and hardest to bear—and she longed a hundred times, to rush away

from the world, which promised nothing that could compensate her for what she had lost. The first break that came to her, was Margaret Albury's visit, and Richard Brandford's letter, and the last did her more good than the first. She was not strong enough, not old enough, and too girlish to start suddenly on a philanthropic career, no matter on how small a scale; she had no idea how to set about it. She had the heart to love the poor and sick, and the desire to help them; but, as yet, she had neither the energy nor the physique. Both might come in some dim future, if home duties, and home influence, were impossible things for ever; but the time was not yet, that was certain. Still Margaret Albury's plain-spoken words were taken to heart, and bore good fruit.

But it was Richard Brandford's letter that roused her most. It was not sentimental. It was merely a short pleasant note, which he wrote partly because he had said he would write, and partly for some reason which he did not care to define, for when satisfied that there was no particular harm in them, he never troubled himself to find motives for his actions. He merely told her of his safe arrival, inquired after Jack and said a few words of sympathy for his illness, and advised her to read some particular book; and then concluded with a few remarks on Spa and the places he had passed through. That was all; but it woke again in Polly's heart the love which months before had stolen into it unawares, and she felt that for the sake of that love her hands and brain must lie idle no longer. There was no harm in the feeling she had for Richard Brandford; no sickly sentiment or unreasoning devotion (as devotion given too easily often is); no unmaidenly excess of unsought-for, passionate, affection. For long months, she had almost forgotten that she loved him, though unconsciously, even then, it formed an undercurrent to her life, and now it served, not to make her forget her dear ones who were gone, but to help her to give them a still higher love, and as a lever to raise her

thoughts above the routine of her simple every-day duties. Though gradually it came to govern her life, and regulate most of its actions, it never ruffled its serenity; it was a sweet, pure, almost grateful love, such as might have been given in old days to a patron saint, though Richard Brandford was not in the least like any saint in the calendar.

"They are quite right," she said to herself the next morning, as she sat thinking of Margaret's conversation and Richard Brandford's letter, and putting the two together somehow, till they made a whole. "It will never do to spend all my time in vain regrets, or in occupations that are useless. I have a great deal yet to do. There is papa, even if he will not care for me, I can be useful to him, and then Mr. Brandford always said that quiet and loneliness could be both profitable, and pleasant, if one only knew how to employ them." She read her letter again, it was the first she had ever had from him, and she remembered Robert Welch's first letter, and thought how different it was from this one. She had read that a good many times; but after a few days she had forgotten all about it. This one she knew by heart before it had been an hour in her possession, and she carried it about with her, and pulled it out a dozen times a day, even when she had not time to indulge in the luxury of spelling over the words. They were very indistinct words; but that only added to her enjoyment, for there was a pleasant excitement in trying to make out the letters which composed them; a hopeless task, for he never shaped one properly, and the words only looked like vague portraits of what they were intended to be; then having given it a little pat, she put it back into her pocket, with a smile and a blush, wondering what she should say in return, and how soon it would do to answer it, without seeming to do so too quickly.

So Polly looked round for work to do. She began with her father's house, which, in spite of its dreariness, she made more comfortable; learning careful housewifely

ways, and attending to his individual comfort; and though he never repaid her by a single word of acknowledgment, she was yet thankful to find things she could do for him. She tried hard, too, in these days, to win a little affection from him, thinking, perhaps, that now she was all he had left, he might care for her a little more than formerly; but he never altered, in manner at any rate.

He gave her kind words after his own fashion, but there was no warmth, and Polly felt no heart in them; still she was not discouraged, but showered a dozen little attentions and caresses on him, which he only tacitly accepted, and never acknowledged. He might have had some affection for her, after his own fashion, but if he had, he never showed it. It might have been that he was ashamed of taking a first step in a right direction, and was ashamed to confess it, even if he felt touched by her kindness, or grateful for her care.

Sometimes she noticed with alarm, how much he altered in the long months after Mrs. Dawson's death. He grew nervous and excitable, and seemed unsettled as to his affairs, telling her at one time that she was trying to ruin him, and that he should let the dingy house and send her to her aunt at Benthwaite, and at another, that he should dissolve partnership at once with Albury, and take to some more lucrative profession.

The hope of effecting any change in his demeanour Polly almost abandoned, as the months went on; but his comfort she never neglected, and tried in every way to study it. The house itself looked better than formerly. In her mother's time she had not been the responsible mistress, and Mrs. Dawson, though childish and ease-loving, would have resented interference. She now took pains to make it appear at its best. And a pretty little housewife Polly looked as she went critically through the rooms, or considerately reflecting that one underpaid servant could not do everything, dusted the chilly, desolate drawing-room, or darned a "Jacob's ladder" in the curtains.

Robert Welch came to town once during the winter, and when he saw Polly laboriously adding up the tiny items of her weekly expenditure, he fell more in love with her than ever, and told her "that the very thought of a pudding made by her gave him an enormous appetite." Then Polly laughed her old, sweet laugh, and bewitched him as of old.

"Why you never used to do this kind of thing before," he said, in surprise; "you took to caring for books, and all that, you know."

"I care for books, and all that more than ever, Robert," she answered gravely, "but you see I am obliged to look after the house now, there is no one else to do it."

"Oh, but I say, Polly,—" and then came a long pause, one of Robert's old, long pauses. Polly knew them well.

"Yes, what?"

"Well, you know—" in a hesitating, doubting voice, "you must want to be married, you must, you know, now you've taken to this sort of thing."

"I don't, Robert. I don't indeed."

"Oh, but you know, you'd have a house, a jolly little place all to ourselves you know, and you'd do just as you liked. You should always have your own way, Polly."

"I don't want my own way."

"And you don't want to be married?" in an entreating voice; "you don't really—I mean you won't?"

"No, dear Robert, no," she answered gently, but firmly. "Dear Robert, you are my brother and Jack's dear friend. You must be content with that."

"I can't, you know," he said; "I never shall. But I'll never bother you any more," which was precisely what he always said; "you mustn't be angry with me for what I've said, you mustn't be unkind to me," he added. The tears came into her eyes as she answered—

"Oh, Robert, I wouldn't for all the world, and I'd do anything for you except—except—"

"All right, Polly, don't say it—I know," and he went to the window and whistled; and when he wished her good-bye, and said a hasty, "God bless you," before he went off to Liverpool again, the tears were in his faithful eyes.

"Dear Robert," she said, as she watched him off, and saying to herself the words he would not let her say to him, "I would do anything in the world for him, except marry him."

Polly told Robert Welch truly enough that she cared for books more than ever. Reading was the great solace and delight of her life. There were but few books in the dingy house, and she had long ago read every line in the box of books Richard Brandford had lent her, but she borrowed of Mr. Albury, who had an excellent library, and was always ready to lend. Margaret Albury, who was not badly read, helped her in choosing what to read, and so gradually Polly became acquainted with the best writers of her own country. She had no one to talk over the subjects with, for Margaret Albury only paid her visits by fits and starts, and was seldom in a humour for discussion; but she sat alone and thought them over for many an hour, and this lonely thought did her a world of good. And so the frivolous little considerations about bows and beads, and trifles light as air, were forgotten, although she could twist a ribbon in her hair if occasion required it, or adjust a flower in her dress as daintily as ever. A new pleasure opened out to her too, in those lonely days,—walking. Many and many a mile Polly walked, on the outskirts of London, or anywhere where fresh air could be had, without much trouble or expense. And her eyes, and ears, and notions of decorum, were never shocked in any way; but then she never attracted notice either in manner or dress, but went on her way noticing the hedges and flowers, if she passed them, or the blue in the sky, or the children's faces, and thinking of her books

and music, of or her mother's hidden face, or perhaps of Richard Brandford's distant one, but as far as concerned the passers by, unnoticed and unnoticed. Thus was Polly's life spent; and if she became more thoughtful as time wore on, she lost none of her naiveness and freshness, for her worldly knowledge did not increase in proportion to her book knowledge. On the contrary, as she became absorbed in the one, she forgot the other more and more, and so in manner she altered little; and if Richard Brandford could have seen her he would have said she was as "kitten-like" as ever.

That first letter from Spa was not by any means the only one; another and another followed at rather long and irregular intervals, and so by degrees a correspondence was established. And those letters were a great comfort to Polly; the morning that brought her one meant the beginning of a happy day in her quiet life. She never dreamt how the little, careful, prim ones she wrote in reply, were prized, and she would not have believed it, if any one had told her that she was slowly stealing into the world of quiet and thought, and books and sunshine which had once been everything to Richard Brandford.

CHAPTER II.

THE LAWYER HEARS OF A CASE.

HENRY DAWSON was far more lonely and miserable than Polly suspected. He missed his son terribly. He missed his wife too, and felt, rather than acknowledged, how much he had neglected her. Perhaps in his own way he would have turned to Polly, had such a thought occurred to him, but, in spite of her supplicating face, and little pleading ways, the thought never did occur to him; nay, the very sight of her often irritated him, and her attentions, if he noticed them, worried him.

Lately, too, he had tired of his life, had felt impatient at the monotony of the law, and longed to make money more quickly. He wanted to accumulate by hundreds, not by twenties and fifties. He had a feverish longing to throw up the profession altogether, and try his fortune on the Stock Exchange, unless he could get hold of some great and intricate case, by winning which he might become rich and famous. Why he was in such haste to get rich, he did not know, or trouble to consider. He had no object in view, no one for whom he designed his wealth; and he did not derive any comfort, or gratification from contemplating his money, as misers proper are supposed to do; he seemed to be heaping it together for some vague purpose, of which he was as yet unconscious. One thing was certain, he was determined to break off his partnership with Mr. Albury, and that as quickly as possible. There had been more than a talk of it several times. A few months back there had been a desperate quarrel between them, and a dissolution of partnership all but effected. They had

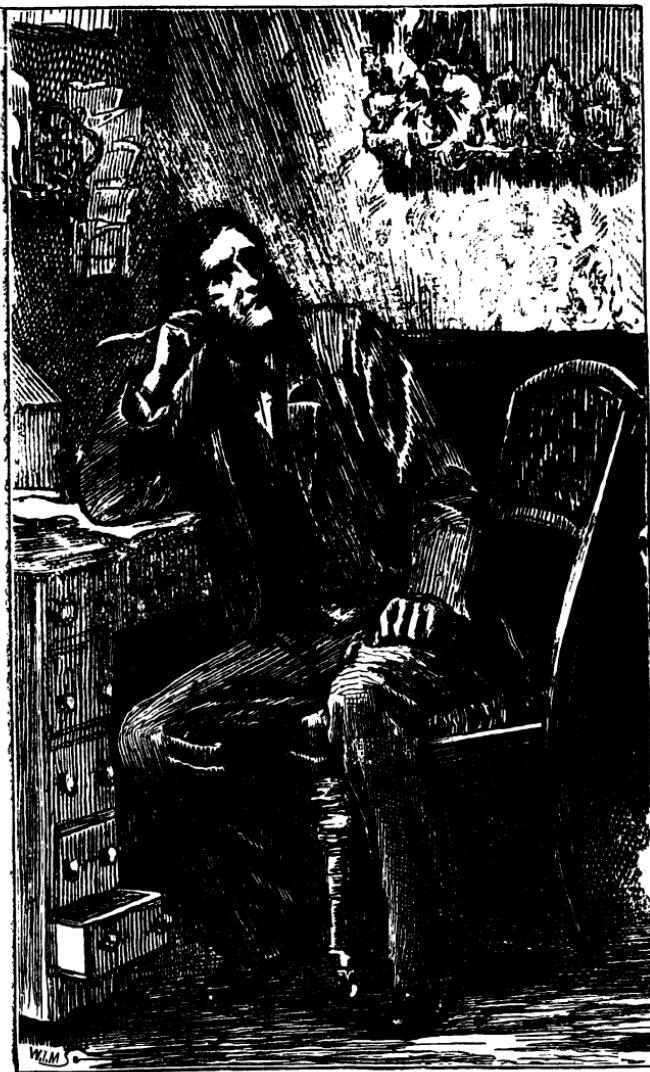
made up the quarrel at the last moment, still they did not agree very well. Albury was too careful, too much of a safe and sure man to please Henry Dawson, who, dearly as he prized his gains, was often ready to risk them on the chance of winning a great deal. He knew Albury would agree to the dissolution, and, indeed, rather wished it, for they had not got on well together lately, and were beginning already to go separate ways.

Henry Dawson sighed as he thus made up his mind one April morning, walking down to the city. Whether he was a good or bad man, he did not trouble to consider, but there was one thing he did feel, as he walked on with the spring sunshine in his eyes, that, for one who, if he had not achieved any great successes, yet had had no failures in life, he was a very wretched man.

It was late when he entered the office that morning. It was a long trudge to the city, and he was not as brisk as formerly—perhaps his years were telling upon him, or his energy was flagging. When he reached his destination at last, he found his partner busily chatting with a tall aristocratic-looking man of about sixty, a man with a set smile, yet rather a careworn countenance. Henry Dawson summed him up with a practised eye in a moment. “Poor evidently, but well connected, his clothes not new, but made by so excellent a tailor they will not easily look old. A man of the world and a hypocrite.” Mr. Albury turned to his partner as he entered.

“Ah, Dawson,” he said, “I was just wishing for you. This is my old friend Mr. Grant Stanmore,” and he introduced him. “Now, my dear sir,” he said to his visitor, “now is your time. Dawson is just the man you want; plenty of money, plenty of patience, and fond of speculative work, take him into your confidence, show him all the titles and deeds, promise half the fortune if he wins, and you are a made man.”

“Albury likes his joke,” Mr. Stanmore said, courteously. “I wish I could find some one who would



“‘I SHALL BE HAPPY, I AM SURE,’ THE LAWYER SAID,
SITTING DOWN TO HIS TABLE TO SIGNIFY THAT HE
WAS GOING TO WORK” (p. 149).

devote to the case he alludes to, all you are so fortunate as to possess," and he bowed to Henry Dawson, with his everlasting smile on his countenance. "I would not mind promising half the fortune which gaining it would bring."

Henry Dawson was the lawyer of old in a minute. He made his excuses, he was then very busy, but, at any future time, he should be very happy to have the details, and give an opinion. He had not the slightest intention of doing either in reality; but his hearer, not knowing him, was deceived, and thought he had perhaps really discovered a champion who would fight his cause.

"I shall be delighted to tell you the facts at any time," he said beamingly. "I am convinced, and I have told Albury so for years, that there is a certain victory for any one who has the requisite patience and tact to gain it, only he has never had the 'time to devote to it.'"

"I see, I see," Henry Dawson said, graciously, but absently, for he had not the faintest idea of troubling himself in the matter; his partner, however, seemed to think it an excellent joke.

"You must get Dawson to your lodgings," he said, "and he will soon tell you, if there is anything to be got out of the affair, and you can show him the painting of the old place to spur him on."

"I shall be happy, I am sure," the lawyer said, devoutly wishing the whole affair at Jericho, and sitting down to his table to signify that he was going to work. He had not given the faintest nibble at the bait thrown out, for he not unnaturally concluded that if the Stanmore lawsuit—he supposed it was a lawsuit—had been worth the trouble, Albury would have been ready enough to have taken it up years before.

Mr. Stanmore rose to leave, and lingered a minute; he was a man of lingering, dawdling habits. He smiled blandly, and rather patronisingly, as he passed Henry Dawson, and, repeating his invitation, held out his hand,

which the lawyer felt patronised while it touched his own, then with a word or two more to Albury, which he stopped, for a minute, at the door-way to say, he departed.

"What a bore that man is," Mr. Albury said to his partner as he returned to the office and closed the heavy baize-covered door, "I almost wish you would look into his case one day and have done with it."

"What is the case?" Henry Dawson asked, in surprise; "and who is this man?"

"Well, this is the history," Mr. Albury replied. "The Stanmores were formerly great people in the West Indies, with all the absurd ideas of their own importance which West Indians usually have. They were rich people, the father of this man had nine thousand a-year, and was an influential man in the island to which his estates belonged, but he was very extravagant—that is another trait of your wealthy West Indian—and ran through most of his money; luckily, the estates were entailed, so that, however he might encumber, he could not sell them out and out. He had three sons, of which this man (Grant) was the second. The eldest was as wild as his father, and the two together cut off the entail, while this man was a youngster at school, and he maintains, that his brother at the time of the cutting off of the entail, (of which it seems he did not know for a long time afterwards), was not actually of age, though, what documents he has to prove this I have never examined. It was cut off at any rate, as the father intended selling the estates, but for some reason they were not sold, probably because in the state they were then in, and the deterioration of West Indian property, and with the number of charges they had upon them, no one would buy them. A few years later young Stanmore, the eldest son, died, when Grant, having quarrelled with his father, and, indeed, all his family, was in England, as a lieutenant in the army. Grant never saw his father again, but, at the old man's death, was indignant at finding that all the property was left to the third son,

Alfred. It did not matter much at the time, but now that the estates are once more free of debt, and bringing in to the youngest son a large income, Grant Stanmore fancies it is possible to prove that the entail was not legally cut off, and that he can claim the estates which his brother has brought to such a flourishing condition. Too troublesome and expensive an affair to take up, still, there is a chance of success. I have proposed his trying to make it up with his brother, with whom he has been at variance for years, by which means, the brother being in delicate health, and with only one sickly child, Grant may yet come into the estates, without the trouble of any litigation at all. The worst part of it is, that for years he never disputed his brother's right to the property, that is, while it was not worth a song; but now he seems almost to doubt whether his father made a will at all, and half fancies the brother, putting a bold face on matters, quietly took possession of everything. It might turn out a good case. The worst of it is, that Grant Stanmore is such a humbug, has not a penny-piece to open the war with, and if you do not keep him at arm's length, tries to borrow money of you."

"He would not borrow any of me," Henry Dawson said grimly, "how has he managed to live all his life?"

"By a series of lucky accidents which happen to some men. He was formerly in the army, but sold out, and lived on the proceeds of his commission for a little while, then by his mother's death he came into some money which he ran through. They seem to be a race of spendthrifts. He married an heiress and ran through her money, she is dead, he came in for various legacies, and he ran through them. He passed for a great swell at one time, and his daughter, who was a beauty, was sought after by all the men who once saw her; and the father borrowed money of them till they became cool, or the daughter snubbed them, or in some way let them slip through her fingers, for she is single still. He paints a little, wretched daubs, which he calls

portraits, and sells to his aristocratic friends (or, at least, he sells them to those whom he has not yet tired out). He always borrows money, but he must have pretty well exhausted his resources by this time, and how he manages now, I do not know. He wrote some articles once on military tactics, and they appeared in a magazine, and he got a little by them. In fact, Grant Stanmore lives on his wits; and his agreeable manners, and aristocratic appearance, and his beautiful daughter, are all able assistants of his wits. He has lodgings somewhere in Pimlico, and he gets crusty because his old acquaintance forget to ask him to dinner, and refuse to lend him money, which he never pays back, by the way; still, he is generally smiling, and always well-dressed, and looks well-preserved; in fact, he is a mystery."

"I don't think I shall trouble about his case," Henry Dawson said gravely. "If there was a will, of course it has been proved in the ordinary way, and that is easily ascertained, and the evidence to be got at to prove that the cutting off of the entail was illegal, is too far away. I don't suppose the estates are worth anything either, even if they are to be had. Few West Indian properties are since the emancipation—especially properties on which the owner is not his own manager, and I suppose these Stanmores were all too fine to work."

"I quite agree with what you say," his partner answered dryly, "still you know you are fond of speculation, and here is a fortune to be shot at, and if we part company, you might find the chance of hitting it exciting enough for your fancy."

"I don't throw good money after bad," the lawyer answered shortly.

"Still, there's nothing like one grand move for making a fortune," Mr. Albury said, quoting Henry Dawson's often repeated words, "and—oh, here is Stanmore's address. You had better look in on him one evening, perhaps the daughter's beauty will touch your heart, and draw the money out of your pocket."

"My dear Albury," Henry Dawson answered meekly, 'I think you ought to know me better than to suppose I could be so foolish ;' he had recovered his old manner, but the chaff grated on him.

Before the end of the week the dissolution of partnership between Dawson and Albury was decided upon. Of course matters could not be arranged and wound up in a moment, but still it had been decided upon, and that was a great step towards it.

Polly had some news for her father when he returned that evening. She had had a visit from a relation, a hitherto unknown event in her life. Mrs. Phillips, her mother's elder sister, had been to see her that afternoon. Mr. Phillips was a rising young surgeon at Kendal, where he had married the second daughter of the curate of Benthwaite. He had now done rising, had made a fair independence, which had been increased by the death of an elder brother, who had lived at Ealing. To Ealing Mr. and Mrs. Phillips and their family had betaken themselves, where they had fair means to live upon, and a comfortable house, the property of the late elder brother, to live in. Mrs. Phillips had always disliked Henry Dawson, "poor Mary's husband," as he was always called; but now that Mrs. Dawson had gone, and she (Mrs. Phillips) had come to live so near London, she concluded that she might pay some little attention to "poor Mary's child," for, as she explained to her husband, it would not be "'common decency or Christian behaviour' to leave the child with not a relation to look after her, when there was one within an hour's reach of her." So she went to see Polly, and went alone, for fear she should be fast, or like her father, or deformed, or there should be any other reason, moral or physical, why she should not be introduced to her cousins, the Phillipses. Mrs. Phillips returned with the information that "poor Mary's daughter seemed a nice enough kind of girl, she hadn't much to say, but she seemed affectionate, poor thing. She had a very

shabby dress on, that couldn't have cost more than a shilling a yard when new, but it was a wonder she had any at all with such a father as she had. She spoke very affectionately of her poor mother, and stood up for her father, and would not allow a word to be said against him, which was nice of her, for it was as clear as anything, that he was as stingy as ever. She'd never been anywhere, though she'd lived her life in London, not even to the gardens at Kew, or to Madame Tussaud's; and really it *was* shameful, though she didn't like it when she (Mrs. Phillips) said, she supposed her father wouldn't give her the money to go with. She was rather a pretty girl, but no style, not to be compared with our girls"—and Mrs. Phillips looked round at her own daughters triumphantly—"and there didn't seem to be much go in her, but how could one expect it, poor thing?"

"Your aunt Phillips," said Henry Dawson. "I remember her, a sharp, practical woman, too great a talker—far too great. People who talk much, my dear Polly, seldom talk well, and what they say cannot *all* be true; remember that, always remember that." It was a speech made in something of the old manner, and sounded as if her father was getting better.

On the whole Polly was not sure that she would care very much about her new relatives, and if her cousins dressed as finely as their mother, she did not think she should go very often to Ealing even if she were asked.

CHAPTER III.

“WHOM DID YOU MEAN THEN?”



RICHARD BRANDFORD had been a whole week in London ; but he had not made any attempt to see Polly. He had had an answer to his last letter—a prim, careful little answer as usual ; for Polly had not the pen of a ready writer, any more than the tongue of a great talker—before he started for town, and he had delayed writing again to her. He was not sure that he should go and see her. The reason was that he felt almost bound to go, and an obligation made him dislike the idea of doing even what pleased him best. He re-established himself in his comfortable rooms ; he strolled back again into his favourite London walks ; he called to see the Claytons ; he decided he would not, at any rate just yet, call on the Albury's ; he filled his rooms with books, he fell into his old habits ; and he kept away from the dingy house. “It is just as well,” he said to himself ; “I do not see that anything good can come of it.” Yet he had thought very often, during the months he had been absent, of the tearful, smiling, frightened face which had so unconsciously reflected its owner's heart on the day he had last seen it, and he had lingered almost tenderly over the remembrance ; but that was all. Yes, he was quite sure that that was all. He never fell in love. Besides, Polly was a nice little girl, pretty to look at and pleasant to remember ; but still, he wanted something more in a wife ; then though, to do him justice, it never entered into his consideration, their positions were rather different. He had altered in some things while he had

been away. He had mixed more in society, and had even flirted a little, and admired fair women, and talked with wise and witty ones ; and he had discovered that he was very hard to please, or else that he was naturally cold and heartless. This was what he concluded, on finding that the impression all women—wise, witty, or pretty—made upon him was much about the same. So he settled down very contentedly, into his quiet self-contained life, in the Bayswater Road, without bestowing a single thought, much less a regret, upon any one he had met during all the time he had been away. Yet somehow, in spite of everything, Polly's face had often presented itself to his mind's eye, and Polly's letters had always been read more than once. They were ugly little letters, written, in a very spiky hand, on pink paper ; he turned up his nose at them, and quizzed them unmercifully. Yet he liked them, and was glad when they came, and answered them by fits and starts ; and put down his book now and then, or looked straight over it, and thought of that wonderful dinner-party at Kensington, and the "crumpled rose" that seemed to feel so keenly all its shortcomings. And yet when he came to town he did not go near her.

He caught sight of her once quite unexpectedly while strolling down Bond Street. He saw a middle-aged lady, followed by a young one in mourning, come out of one of the minor picture galleries, and enter a brougham which was waiting. The young one was Polly, he saw her face distinctly ; it was graver than formerly, but it had all its old sweetness, and the bright flush and drooping eye-lids were unchanged. Richard Brandford's heart gave a little throb. He could not help it, though he was ashamed of his weakness, and resolved, more strongly than ever, that he would not go near her. He looked at the brougham as it drove off, and he laughed, somehow it reminded him of Mrs. Dawson. It was such a shabby turn-out, and had so evidently seen all winds and weathers, and the horse

and its harness had lost the light and the beauty of other days. The coachman too in his livery, which was anybody's livery, looked such an apology for himself, and told as plainly as possible that he was the only male servant in the establishment to which he belonged, and that he was "a general utility man."

He stood still, and watched it out of sight, then he laughed again, and went home to dinner, and thought of Polly, and of Polly's face, as after the lapse of nine or ten months he had that day seen it.

"Hang the girl," he said almost savagely, "she is always in my head." He went out again later in the evening, and strolled about the pleasant neighbourhood in a listless, idle manner, and he remembered how Polly had sometimes walked by his side, along those same streets and terraces, when, as had sometimes happened the previous year, he had seen her home from the Albury's. They had been happy half-hours for Polly, and she had chattered merrily, and laughed, and made a little heaven for herself out of the thirty minutes or so; telling him a dozen trifles light as air, which he did not pretend to himself he had been interested in, or even listened to; yet he thought of them now, and of how she used to look up into his face almost unconsciously, to take her tone from its expression.

"I daresay she is going to marry the 'ward' by this time," he said carelessly, at least he meant it to be carelessly; and with an effort he dismissed Polly from his consideration for a time.

A few days afterwards he found himself, how he hardly knew, only a few doors from the "dingy house."

"I'll just go by, and see how it looks," he thought. The dining-room window was a little way open, and some one was playing and singing very softly. Well he knew the voice and the song—

"Till a' the seas gang dry, my dear,
And the rocks melt wi' the sun:
I will luv thee still, my dear,
While the sands o' life shall run."

"History repeats itself," he thought, laughingly. "She was singing last time I paid a first visit." And he entered the gate, went deliberately up the steps, and knocked at the door. The piano ceased; he fancied he saw the window curtain pulled aside, and some one trying to see who it was, and he stood on the top step, in order that he might not be known until he was legitimately discovered. Then he heard the dining-room door open, and a voice say softly, "Susan, if that is Aunt Phillips, show her into the drawing-room; and if it's Miss Albury show her in here." Polly quite forgot how distinctly she could be heard from the outside. He was let in then, and he stood for a moment hesitating, when suddenly the dining-room door opened again—he felt convinced the young cat had been listening, and peeping through a crack—and Polly stood before him, her two eyes wide open with astonishment.

"Mr. Brandford."

"Yes," he nodded; "How do you do?" he added, prosaically enough, and walked into the dining-room. "You did not know I was in town, did you?"

"Oh, no, but I am so glad to see you;" and she made him sit down in the shabby easy chair, and, taking a seat opposite to him, waited with a smile for all that he had to say.

Polly was not worldly-wise enough to be hypocritical, and was too surprised and pleased to be coquettish.

"When did you come—yesterday?" she asked. It never occurred to her that he could have been half-a-dozen days, much less nearly a whole month, in town without coming near her.

"No, I came three or four weeks ago," he answered, at which she pouted a little, not that she cared, for she was only too glad to see him at all.

"Oh," she said, and he laughed at hearing her favourite monosyllabic reply again.

"I caught sight of you one day coming out of a

picture gallery; but you got into a brougham and did not see me," he informed her.

"Oh no, indeed, I did not see you," she replied; "It was my aunt's carriage," she added, while he laughed again inwardly at the idea of that rumble-tumble affair being called a carriage, and she thought—that snobby little Polly—with a shade of satisfaction almost worthy of Mrs. Dawson, that it was a grand thing to have a real live horse, four wheels, and a man-servant in the family. "Poor mamma's sister, Mrs. Phillips," she continued, "has come to live at Ealing, and sometimes she takes me out."

"And I suppose you often go down and see her?"

"Oh no, I have never been yet. Aunt Phillips has two daughters, and they came to see me. You know they are well off, and very grand, so different from us, and I don't think they care about me." She did not say it boastingly, but almost meekly, looking down in perfect good faith at her cheap dress and shabby little slippers.

"I see," he answered; thinking that time had not taken away her simplicity. Then he told her a little about himself, and she listened eagerly, while he thought how sweet a face she had, and how bright a smile, though it was not so frequent as formerly. "And now, tell me, how you employ your time," he said presently. "Are you not dull all alone, or do you go out much?"

"No," she answered, "I am never dull, and I seldom go out, except for walks, and about once a week to the Alburys, to borrow books. I think I spend half my time in reading."

"Well, and what do you do with the other half of your time?"

"Oh, I walk, and play, and work, and look after the house—there is no one else to do it now, you know, and there are a great many things to be done in one way and another."

"Quite a settled down little woman," he said.

"Quite a settled down little woman," she echoed, looking at him for the first time, and discovering that he had not altered in the least.

"I thought as I entered," he told her, "that history repeats itself. You were singing last time I paid you a first visit, and you were singing again to-day. You had better go and finish the song."

"Shall I?" and she rose readily, and went to the piano, for she remembered that he used to like her voice. "What do you want to hear—this?"

"Yes," he said; and she began again, "My love is like a red, red rose;" and sang it very sweetly till she came to the third verse, which he had heard from the outside, and then she faltered a little. It is a difficult thing to sing a very sentimental song in the first person, when one solitary young man constitutes the audience. However she soon came to the last words—

"And I will come again, my luve,
Though it were ten thousand miles."

and she looked up at him with a touch of her former vanity, waiting to be praised.

"Well, you see, I have come," he said, answering the words rather than the look.

"Oh, I did not mean you!" she exclaimed, alarmed the colour rushing to her face.

"Pray, whom did you mean then?"

"Nobody," she replied; hanging her head.

"What has become of the pale-faced gentleman?"

"What, Robert Welch," she answered eagerly, "he has gone to Liverpool. I seldom see him now."

"I suppose the young coquette has sent Mr. Robert Welch to the right about, if the truth is known," he thought. "Well, I must be going," he said aloud, "I have been here an hour and a half at least."

"Have you, it does not seem nearly so long," she added with unconscious flattery. "Will you come

again?" she asked. Polly had not the faintest idea that it was anything out of the way for a gentleman to pay a young lady long afternoon visits. It did not seem possible, and the notion, indeed, never presented itself to her that there could be any harm in it. Conventionality was a thing, of which Polly had not the slightest knowledge. Richard Brandford never troubled himself about it, nor cared about it in any way; it was one of the necessary hollownesses of the world, which he thoroughly despised, and personally ignored, and so without any more idea of harm than Polly's own self, he answered—

"Yes, I will come again soon, if I may, and I will bring you some books, so that you will not have to trouble the Alburys." Then he went, and Polly watched him out of sight as she always used to do, while she felt her heart beating, as it had not done since the day he wished her good-bye months and months before, and as it would not have done for Robert Welch, had he waited a century.

"There is no one like him," she said, with a little sigh, "No one in the world, there never will be."

Richard Brandford soon re-established himself on his former friendly footing, and went, again and again, to the dingy house. He never troubled to ask himself why, but still he went, and he found that an hour or two soon slipped away in Polly's society. He took her books to read, that was a great excuse, generally those which he had first read himself, and in which he lingered over passages, wondering what she would think of them, and afterwards when they chatted them over, he always listened to her remarks with interest, for if they were not very deep, they were fresh and amusing, and sometimes even thoughtful. Then, too, she was not very self-reliant, and had but little faith in her own ideas, when they proved to be in opposition to his, yet she never agreed with him as a mere matter-of-course, so as to become as a woman often does, a mere echo of a stronger mind than her own.

He found it very pleasant to saunter round, and talk with her for an hour or so on subjects in which they both felt an interest, especially on wet days, or any chilly ones, when there was no sun to expel a cosy little fire. She had always a smile for him, she was always bright and pretty to look at, glad to see him, and ready to sing his favourite songs ; her face always lighted up when he came, and fell when he went, and he afterwards, remembering the smile, and dwelling, again and again, on the shadow, found an unconscious satisfaction in them both. Sometimes he was cross when her face intruded too much upon his thoughts, and made up his mind not to see so much of her ; and he stayed away, perhaps for a whole fortnight, and told himself, he did not care about going, but when he could withstand the temptation no longer, he went, he pretended reluctantly, and only because "she would think it so queer," but in reality only too gladly. Polly pouted at first, on seeing him, after one of these absences, though she would not condescend to tell him why, but she soon forgot her pique. Then one day he went just as she, not by any means expecting him, was setting out for a walk, and he would not hear of her re-entering the house, but said he would stroll a little way with her, and he strolled a long way, how far he did not notice, and Polly was far too happy to do so, till a little tired look came over her face, and he insisted on turning back. After that afternoon, they gradually fell into the habit of going out together, and when the spring breeze brought a deeper colour to her face, or played with the shawl round her slender shoulders, Richard Brandford thought, how many a time he had seen a less beautiful face, and more ungraceful figure, made the subject of a painter's ideal. So it came about that Polly's smiles, and sweet tones, and thoughtful ways, made up a very bright element in Richard Brandford's life.

"She altered very much in the year I was away," he said to himself once, little thinking how much of the

alteration was due to the self-culture of which he had sown the seeds, the reading for which he had given her the taste, and the power and exercise of thought, which he had first shown her she lacked. When he had left her she was a child to be petted and spoilt; he found her a child in some things still, perhaps, but a woman it was easy also to love and admire, not that he ever for one moment dreamt that he was in love with her. The idea never occurred to him, or, if it did, he dismissed it at a moment's notice. No, he liked her, and it was dull for her living almost alone, and seeing no one, and he and she liked many things in common, and—well, a dozen other excuses presented themselves in the shape of reasons for going to see her, but he was quite sure that he was not in love with her for all that, nor she with him. He had almost forgotten his former conclusion on this last point, and since his return he had never troubled himself about making another. He thought he knew the whole secret of Polly's attraction for him, and though it was certainly not the whole secret, yet he was quite right in thinking it had a great deal to do with it. It was that they kept the proper balance when together, which as a rule should be preserved between a man and a woman. She was quite clever enough for him to find her an agreeable companion, but yet not so clever, or strong-minded, or self-assertive, that her knowledge astonished him, or that his respect for her abilities swallowed up his admiration for her as a woman. She was just pretty, and quick, and bright, thoughtful, with enough intelligence to render talking, not only to, but with her, pleasant, and to prevent his sense of her prettiness from wearing off.

With Polly it was simply the old story over again. From the first day she saw him she had liked Richard Brandford; she had ended by falling in love with him. He went away, and her feeling for him was, so to speak, lulled to sleep. When he returned, it awoke. The days of that spring in which he came so often, bringing her books and staying an hour talking of, perhaps, a dozen

different things, yet not one of them sentimental, were the happiest she had ever known. In them she regained all her old brightness and happiness, recollected all her former coqueties, and played them off upon him, and remembered all her girlish cunning, in the arrangement of ribbon and lace, in order to make herself more winsome in his eyes. She did not lose her eagerness in the pursuits she had followed during the months he was absent, but when he returned he tinted them all. She twined his remembrance in with all the actions of her life till he became their dictator. When she read, she read the books he liked, and had advised her to read ; when she played, she learnt the songs she knew to be his favourites. He became just her life, her world, her everything. She never stayed to realise this. She was not sentimental, nor tearful, nor fretful, nor anxious, nor anything of the kind, as most women would have been, seeing that he never gave her a word which it gladdened her heart to remember. She simply accepted each day as it came, passing it happily and contentedly, with a smile on her face, and a song on her lips, as she went through her various little household duties, entering with a zest into all she did, taking all possible pains to make herself and her surroundings look their best. If he came, she was glad beyond all measure, and when he went, she lingered in satisfied day-dreams over his words and looks and ideas, till he became her king, her hero, her model of all that was great and noble in the world, and a reason why she herself should strive to be all that a woman should be, so that she might feel worthy of his— his what ? Love, friendship, admiration, or what ? That she never stayed to consider. She was not speculative, she had not matrimony on the brain like many girls ; she had not a thought of ever being married, much less of Richard Brandford's marrying her ; not that she had any idea of remaining single all her life, she simply never looked forward. That happy present was enough for her, filling all her heart and thoughts, and she never, or very seldom, and then

but vaguely, looked out into the future. She never imagined that Richard Brandford was in love with her ; she never stopped to consider the possibility of such a thing, and if she had, she would have shaken her head, in spite of any wild hope her daring heart might venture to suggest. She had loved him the year before, but not as she loved him now. Then he had formed a part—a great and important part, but still only a part—of her living world. Now he formed the whole ; now he was her one thought, her light, her life, her love, her everything, and yet she never stayed to acknowledge or realise it. They were happy days, indeed, for Polly ! Days which she looked back upon in after years and lived in thought again and again, days in which she was at her prettiest, and happiest, and brightest, in which she had no thought of the world, no knowledge of its guile and its weariness ; no hopes that were not bounded by a week's time, no dreams into which one face, which seemed as if it could never frown, or be other than it was to-day, did not enter ; no pleasures which were not simple and pure, and, in a way, intellectual, for he came and made them so—days when

"Life's realities were all romance."

It seemed to her afterwards in remembering them, as if all the sunshine of her life had been poured upon them to make one glorious summer.

She was not selfish in her happiness. Wherever she went, she tried to scatter some of her gladness. She had sympathy for every one's sorrow, pity for every one's distress, a desire to help all within her reach if it were possible. Her heart heard more plainly than ever it had before the tones of every beggar's voice, genuine or impostor, it did not matter to Polly, and if her coins were small and few, she gave them with a happy smile that made the gift doubly sweet, and she sometimes took pains to discover cases of sickness or distress, and did her little best for them. Happy days indeed for Polly—

days when, had you asked her, she would have told you that the world was a place to be happy in, and Heaven a place to be happier still in hereafter—days when the only anxiety she had was caused by the coldness that nothing could alter in her father, and the only regret that her mother and Jack could but watch her from the sky.

CHAPTER IV.

THE LAWYER PAYS A VISIT.



CAME across Albury again, this morning," Mr. Stanmore said to his daughter, a few days after his visit to the Old Jewry. "He says his partner, who, by the way, will not be his partner much longer, has plenty of money. I think it would be as well to try and be civil to him."

"I am tired of Albury and his set," Adelaide Stanmore answered. "We cultivated them long enough, and gained nothing by it;" and she went on indolently peeling her walnuts. They lived in shabby lodgings at Pimlico (calling it Belgravia), and they were miserably poor, though they did not show it much, all things considered. They always lingered over the dessert, as they were doing to-day.

"Albury lent us twenty pounds once, and it was very acceptable at the time." Grant Stanmore looked as if the remembrance of the loan were not by any means pleasant to him, though he had brought himself to acknowledge it.

"Yes, I know he did," she answered, "and he never forgave himself for lending it. I am glad he never had it back again," she added, but she did not say it spitefully. She was not energetic enough to be spiteful. "I hate the Alburys, every one of them."

"Yet you and the daughter were great friends once, my dear."

"I know. I rather liked her at first. But she presumed too much at last, and said disagreeable things, so we quarrelled. Women's friendships never last.

They always end by getting jealous of each other, or tired of each other. "We tired of each other."

"Still, it was rather a pity on the whole. Knowing them was convenient in many ways."

"They were not in our set," she said, with a little sigh.

"Yes; but after all I am not quite sure what our set is, or that we have any at all now," her father answered. Being alone they could afford to be candid.

"Nor am I," she answered. "I am heartily tired of everything," she added, pushing away her plate and turning to the fire, for it was very chilly that spring, "and, moreover, it seems to me that, unless something turns up soon, we shall be in the streets."

"I wish we could get this partner of Albury's to take up the lawsuit."

"Well, what then? Suppose it failed?"

"Our credit would be improved in the meantime."

"Has he any money?"

"Who?"

"This partner. What is his name?"

"His name is Dawson. Albury says he has lots of money, and as partner in the firm he must be well off; that we can conclude from Albury's own position. He has speculated, the latter tells me, and made a good deal. That is the cause of the difference which is to result in the dissolution of partnership. From all I hear he is rich, but a regular miser."

"A miser! Then he won't lend," she exclaimed, with a short laugh. "I don't think Mr. Dawson is a hopeful subject, if saving is his disposition."

"If he thought the case sure to be successful, he would advance us funds to live upon, while the lawsuit was pending, even as a mere matter of speculation, I dare say."

"I am sick of the case," she said bitterly. "I have heard of it for the last seven years. I believe, too, if we wait with patience we shall get the estate in the end, only we cannot starve while we are waiting. There are only two lives between it and us, you see."

"One too many. If it were only my brother it would not matter so much; but I never believe in the boy being sickly.

"The best thing to do then is what you suggested just now. Try and get this man to take up the case, and, while it is pending, retrieve our position as far as we can."

"Quite so, if we went into society again, you might marry well for one thing."

"I shall never marry now," she interrupted, "I have given up all idea of it."

"Or a thousand things might happen," he continued.

"Or they might not happen."

"Will you ring the bell, my dear," he said, not answering her last remark. "I want to touch up the 'Harvest Field' for an hour or two." He often painted in the evening, which accounted for some of the colouring, perhaps.

"Again?" she said discontentedly; "I hate the very sight of an easel; besides, it is all waste of time, and waste of money for the colours." Grant Stanmore shifted his eyes uneasily. He knew perfectly the value she put upon his painting.

"I was telling Sir George Barker about this picture, when I was at the club yesterday." Grant Stanmore still belonged to a club, not to the one of which he had been a member in former years (somehow he had got out of that, no one knew how), but to a young one with a very high-sounding name, and a "jun." at the end of it. "And he seemed struck by the idea. I shall have it sent to his place for him to look at when it is finished."

"People always seem struck by the ideas, but no one ever pays the price for your pictures," she answered, as she rang the bell. Their relative positions as father and daughter were forgotten excepting in public.

"They have," he said, when the door was closed after the servant. "But you forget how many difficulties I have had to contend against. It was always my

ambition to exhibit, but the doors of the Academy are virtually closed against all but professionals."

"Or geniuses."

"There are very few geniuses there," he answered, getting cross, "you might have seen that for yourself, Adelaide. The fact is, there must be influence in all these matters. I do not know a single member of the committee personally, and besides, they are always jealous of outsiders."

"Oh nonsense," she said, impatiently; "that little girl, Miss Walters, got her picture in, by merely sending it on the chance."

"You always believe any story you hear," he said angrily. "I have no doubt I could easily get my 'Harvest Field' accepted, if I really cared about it"—forgetting what he had said a moment since—"but I do *not* care about, or mean to risk its being refused. We really must know more people. It would be better in many ways that we should do so. We are always at home of an evening now."

"For the simple reason that no one invites us out," she answered; "though if they did, you would have to go alone, for my dresses are all shabby or worn out, and Madame Carboche refuses to let me have any more, and my trinkets have nearly all vanished. We are getting to the verge of beggary, and, unless something is done soon, we shall be in the streets." Then she took a book and began to read, while her father arranged the shade over the gas globes, and prepared his colours ready to touch up the "Harvest Field."

"Is that the rain?" she asked presently; and she shifted her position, and drew a little closer to the fire, then rose uneasily and wandered round the small room, which was not well furnished, and yet had traces of the presence of a refined woman. Books and music, an open piano, a dainty work-basket, and blotting-case, with its gilt mountings getting tarnished, all told of the presence of a woman, and the manner of woman she was. She sauntered listlessly up and down, looking impatiently at

the cheap furniture, her dress rustling against the legs of the painted horse-hair covered chairs. In spite of Madame Carboche's refusal to extend her credit any longer, Miss Stanmore always wore rustling silk, and delicate lace about her throat and wrists.

"It is very chilly," she said, shivering, "I will ring and tell Jane to get me a shawl." The maid brought the wrap, but not willingly, for the days when the people of the house had looked upon them as aristocrats of certain, if varying fortune, were over, and civility was now a luxury of which they had to make the most. She folded the shawl round her shoulders, with an indolent gracefulness that characterised all she did, and went back to her seat. In a few minutes the servant reappeared.

"A gentleman for you, sir," she said, addressing Mr. Stanmore.

"A gentleman," he said, in surprise and alarm. They never had any visitors; he instantly concluded that it must be a dun, who had come to ask for some over-grown and venerable account. "Tell him I am engaged."

"No," said his daughter, looking up and speaking in a whisper, "it is better to see them;" evidently she was thinking of duns too, and thinking of them in the plural. "It pacifies them. Let this man come in, so that no one hears what you say."

"Very well," he said reluctantly. He was a most accomplished and experienced pacifier of duns, but he always shrank with dislike, almost dread, from the task. "Show the gentleman in." He did not enquire his name, but the next moment the servant announced it—

"Mr. Dawson," she said sulkily. She disapproved of lodgers who treated her haughtily, and gave her nothing, having visitors.

"Albury's partner," Grant Stanmore said quickly to Adelaide; then with a gasp of relief, he welcomed him. "My dear sir, how do you do?" and he shook hands, feeling he was condescending while he did so. He was

always smiling and gracious in public, yet all the time aware of the effort his graciousness cost him ; he could have patronised a duke quite naturally, and felt that the duke ought to be grateful for the patronage. " So good of you to come on such a stormy evening. Pray come to the fire. Adelaide, my dear, this is Mr. Dawson. My daughter, Mr. Dawson." She looked up, gave him a little stiff, absent bow, and went on turning over the leaves of her book. She hated poverty, and hungered for money and position, and ease, and luxury ; but above all else she hated being discovered, being seen, and looked at in her poverty, and she did not believe in this man being of any use, and the first sound of his voice grated on her ear. She felt that he was not likely to take up the case of which she had grown tired. She wished the case and the lawyer at Jericho.

" I am delighted to see you ; you have come to have a chat about the matter we mentioned the other morning when I dropped in at the Old Jewry," Grant Stanmore said, blandly. They were something alike, those two men, in their intense blandness and smiles, and their inner aching lives. Alike, and yet different, the one a man of business, and the other a man of the world ; the one intent on getting money to keep ; the other intent on getting money to spend.

CHAPTER V.

THE LAWYER THINKS OF JACK.



ENRY DAWSON was ill at ease. He was not used to society, and the strangeness of his position, and the presence of Adelaide Stanmore, who, however, never looked at him a second time, embarrassed him. He had been to the Albury dinner-parties, and he had received visitors now and then in his own house, but the paying a solitary visit, as he was doing this evening, was a thing he never did. Had Grant Stanmore been more formal, had he received him alone in a study or a dimly-lighted dining-room, and proceeded instantly to talk upon business, he would have been perfectly at home, and entirely his own polite, careful, far-seeing self. But here in this home-like looking room, comfortable, in spite of its shabby furniture, with Grant Stanmore, surrounded by his paintings, and his colours, and his daughter opposite, indifferent though she looked, the lawyer felt awkward, and did not know what to do. It was altogether a new position for him; a programme he had never rehearsed in thought; and he sat uneasily on his chair, not knowing how to begin the conversation upon the subject which had brought him, or what else to say in its place. Since the death of his son he had lost that steady flow of smiling, chatty talk, which had formerly been so habitual to him.

He had only come there by mere chance. He had been in the neighbourhood on other business. It was chilly and cold, and he had no great coat; the rain came on and pelted pitilessly down upon him, and he had no umbrella, and there was no shelter to be had

unless he paid for it. Then trying to find his way about in a locality strange to him, he suddenly found himself almost opposite the house in which Albury had told him Grant Stanmore lived. He determined on an impulse of the moment to call, partly for the sake of shelter, and partly with a vague idea that, if he continued to make the law his profession after another six weeks, when the partnership would be at an end, it would be only as a speculator in causes in which, by one grand coup, a fortune might be placed within his reach. This case of Stanmore's was the first of the kind that had presented itself in any shape, and though he did not believe in its being good for anything, still there was something fascinating in its aspect.

"I cannot lose anything by turning in for an hour," he thought; "the rain may leave off by that time, and if there is anything in the entail story, I shall have gained an idea of it." So he knocked at the street door, and played, at any rate for the moment, the part of the fly, who accepted the spider's invitation to walk into his parlour.

Grant Stanmore soon put his visitor at his ease. He did not begin the West Indian story at once, he was too politic, besides he was glad to have a listener for a little while, to whom he could air his opinions on general matters, and show his pictures. There was one subject of conversation in which he delighted, namely himself; but he could not often indulge in his weakness, for he found that it was one which tired those whom he thought it convenient to try and conciliate. Still it was one upon which he could always feel animated, always eloquent. He told the most dainty little love stories, the most stirring anecdotes of war and danger, all redounding to the honour and glory of Grant Stanmore. Yet he told them so skilfully, that you did not for a long time find out how egotistical he was at heart. He never appeared to brag, seldom or never offended by two frequent a use of the pronoun "I." Till you knew him thoroughly, and wearied of him, you listened to his

stories with a degree of interest, and seldom or never suspected until almost the last sentence that the hero of each was one and the same person, *i.e.*, Grant Stanmore.

"Yes, my dear sir, I am very glad to see you this evening, and hope you will come again, in order that we may talk over a subject which, I am sure, you will find repay you for the trouble." He was anxious at the outset to put Henry Dawson on a friendly, not a professional footing; it was, perhaps, more tiresome than the other, but it was more convenient, and less likely to involve any financial difficulty. "It is a long way for you to come, is it not? You see, my daughter and myself prefer this part of town to all others. It is near to the park, to the clubs, to our friends, to everything; and though we have given up society for the present, we do not care to be too far off from the world we shun. We spend our time very indolently—you must see my pictures, Mr. Dawson; now that we are living quietly, and I have all my time upon my hands, I find art a great consoler."

"Indeed!" the lawyer said; not knowing what response was expected from him.

"Yes," he continued blandly, "I spend most of my evenings in touching up the work of the mornings. I was at work when you entered, as you see. I must get you to look at that picture presently. It is a harvest-field, near Newport, in the Isle of Wight. I have a weakness for Cowes, Mr. Dawson, and always run down for the regatta week still, and stroll into the club; I know almost every member of it. You remember the club, of course, the castle they call it? Well, last year, walking one afternoon from Cowes to Newport, that view took my fancy; I carried it away in my eye, and sketched it that same evening."

"A good memory," the lawyer said, devoutly wishing he would begin the West Indian discussion. He could talk about law; but not about art.

"Yes, and a singular thing too occurred to-day, when

I was at the club ; I was talking with Sir George Barker—you know Barker, I daresay, Mr. Dawson, he is a splendid fellow—and the conversation turned upon pictures. ‘There is one bit of scenery I have so wished to see upon canvas,’ he remarked to me, ‘and wonder it has not been painted—a corn-field in the Isle of Wight, close to Newport. It was a lovely bit. No artist, who is an artist at heart, as well as by profession, could have passed it on an August day without being struck by it.’ ‘Where is the exact spot you mean?’ I asked. Mind, I was sure I was right in my conclusion ; but was determined to be quite certain before speaking. ‘Just beyond Parkhurst, rather to the right, beneath the brow of a hill with a low stone wall bounding it on the west.’ ‘My dear fellow,’ I said, ‘say no more ; I have it done at home. It has been a labour of love with me, and I have done it from memory ; but I will lay any wager you like, that it is correct in every particular.’ Singular, was it not ?”

“Very,” said the lawyer, getting more at ease, but impatient.

“Yes, he admires my pictures, and I have no doubt would give a hundred guineas for that sketch if I cared to accept it, but I am fond of my handiwork. My daubs I sometimes call them fondly ;” and he smiled, little thinking that most people called them daubs also. “I hope I shall show them all to you in time, Mr. Dawson.”

“I hope so,” he answered ; thinking that Grant Stanmore seemed to hold a certain position, even if he possessed no influence in society, judging from his ready chatter of people, and places, and all that belonged to a world of which he (Henry Dawson) was not. The firm of Dawson and Albury had been a very prosperous one, but, owing in a great measure to his own lack of all social powers, it had only been so in a certain groove, which he wished to quit. Then, too, he had been travelling towards fortune all his life, but after the manner of the tortoise who won the race, and the manner of the hare

who lost it was more to his liking. He wanted to live more among people who had fortunes to win or lose, to play for bigger stakes than he had yet done. He knew not exactly what he wanted, only that he was tired of his steady even-going life, and was feverishly impatient to gain at one stroke more than he had by years of toil, yet he hesitated and delayed, and wondered how to set about it. He was not clever even at his business, only sharp, and persevering, with an object in view which he never forgot. A man who was a combination of weakness and wickedness, only the one prevented his excelling in the other. And yet he had some, though very few, soft spots in his heart; the worst of it was that the spot representing his love of money generally covered up all others. There was another point in his character too—cowardice; he could do anything, in the spirit, but in the flesh he hesitated almost at everything, from sheer animal cowardice. He always carried out his purpose if it were possible to do so, yet did it tremblingly, trying with one hand to soothe and propitiate all that he offended with the other.

"Do you care about pictures, Mr. Dawson?" Adelaide Stanmore asked, raising her eyes from her book. She asked the question almost scornfully.

"Yes," he answered, smiling, his old cringing, deferential manner returning in a moment; he had not expected to hear her speak. "I take a great interest in them, I assure you." He hated them with all his heart at that present moment, and never troubled himself about them at all, but that did not matter. He looked at her as he spoke, he saw her face for the first time, and he almost started; and forgetting what she might think, forgetting indeed, altogether, that she was a human being, he gazed at her with a strange sense of wonder and surprise. He never looked at women, or thought of them in any other light than as beings who were rather an incumbrance to the world, and yet beings, whom it was wise and necessary to treat with politeness, and who were in certain ways useful. The face he saw,

however, when he first looked at Adelaide Stanmore's, was totally different from all others he had ever seen, and his very life seemed almost to stand still for a moment, while he looked at it. It was not with admiration, or interest, or any ordinary feeling that he looked at it, but with a vacant stare of surprise, an inward sense, not merely of its beauty, but that having once seen it, he should remember it for ever. It was a strange face, very beautiful still, but not young, nor fresh, nor happy, and there was an eager, restless waiting upon it, a look of faded summer, an unconscious and haughty appeal for all she would have scorned to ask, and yet longed for impatiently; a something wistful and longing, and yet hard and cold, and repelling. It was a wonderful face altogether, and the lawyer looking at it forgot the West Indian property about which he had come, and the pictures with which he was being bored, and Grant Stanmore's tiresome talk, and his own eagerness for money, and thought, not of the woman before him, but of the blue eyes and thin, plaintive features of his son, of the evening when Jack had died, while he stood watching over him, and the terrible blank which had been left in his life when Jack passed out of it.

The lawyer stayed two hours at least in the Chelsea lodging, and, when he left, he had not seen a single paper concerning it, nor heard even one particular about the lawsuit. Adelaide Stanmore did not speak another dozen words, and to those he scarcely listened, but when he left he promised to go again, and to listen carefully to all that Grant Stanmore had to say on the subject, and if there was anything to be made out of it, to look after it.

"I will go again," he said to himself as he walked slowly home. "I think Albury may have let a good speculation slip, through not having had the strength of mind to refuse any premature demands upon his purse." It was a lovely night; the rain had cleared off, and the air was fresh and sweet, and as he walked across the park, he thought of the night when he had carried back

the news that Jack was to go to school. Then suddenly Adelaide Stanmore's face rose before his eyes, and he lingered over the remembrance with a strange half-frightened eagerness. It was not that he actually thought of *her*, but that, for what reason he could not tell, she had made him think of Jack, and feel how much he had loved the boy. He sighed a little wearily as he went on his way. The meanest nature is to be pitied sometimes in its absolute loneliness, for bankrupt of all that is productive of contentment, it sighs at times, though unconsciously, for all that it scorns or passes by unnoticed. Henry Dawson felt to-night as he had felt before, that his money did not satisfy him entirely, and he thought of Jack and sighed; Jack had been his excuse, his apology, for his own eagerness for money. He was as eager as ever still, but aimlessly so, he had no longer an apology to offer himself. As for his daughter he had never considered her much in any way; even her affection bored and irritated him, and after his coldness to her all her life, a feeling almost of shame alone would have prevented his altering his line of conduct towards her.

He reached home at last, and let himself in, and found Polly reading alone in the dining-room.

"Polly," he said crossly, "what are you sitting up for? it is nearly eleven o'clock."

"I was not tired," she replied, "and so I waited till you came. You are so late to-night," she said, in a tone of surprise. The lawyer always spent his evenings at home, for the simple reason that there was nowhere else he could spend them, so that his absence had almost alarmed her.

"I had business," he answered, hurriedly; "I am always at business. You know how hard I work. Go to bed now, I shall look over my papers for half an hour in the study."

"May I come and sit there for a little while?" she asked. "I just want to finish this book. I shall only be a very little while," she pleaded, "and I won't speak to you."

"No, you must be off," he said impatiently, "I want to be alone."

"Very well," she answered submissively. "Oh, papa, Mr. Brandford called to-day. He has come back."

"Brandford? Let me see," he said, absently.

"What don't you remember Mr. Brandford, papa?" she exclaimed; opening her sleepy eyes to their widest extent, in the greatest astonishment, at any one forgetting so important a personage.

"Oh yes, I know now, he was your mother's friend. Well then, go now. Good-night, my dear."

He shut himself in his study, and turned over his papers for a few minutes, then pushing them listlessly away from him, and putting his face down into his hands upon the table, he thought again of the evening when Jack had died.

CHAPTER VI.

ADELAIDE.



DELAIDE STANMORE was nine-and-twenty, and still beautiful. All men admired and any number had gone half-way towards loving her, and then drawn back. They always found out how money-loving and grasping she was, how cold and worldly. Yet she might in past days have married several times; but each time with a lingering tenderness for an old love affair, she had hesitated, and while she did so her captive, discovering her character, had fled from the chains with which at first he had been eager to bind himself.

Eight years before the evening when Henry Dawson paid his first visit to the Stanmores, she had been in love for the only time in her life. They lived at Treston-on-the-Sea in those days; and Stephen Finch, struck by the girl's wonderful beauty, then in all the freshness of youth, proposed, was accepted, and being accepted was satisfied. He was honestly in love with his *fiancée*, but he showed it so little, that to her exacting nature his manner was simply slow torture. He would saunter off for hours along the beach, lazily reading or smoking, without dreaming of asking her to come with him, and he piqued her in similar ways, a dozen times in a day. She could not understand love and admiration which lived under a cool, calm, chatty, and very easy-going exterior. She was piqued that he could exist a month without seeing her, and three days without writing to her; that he could give up the prospect of an hour or two with her, for a day or two's shooting elsewhere; because he was content to wait so very patiently till he could afford

to marry ; he was poor, with little besides his pay ; piqued that he showed no jealousy of the admiration of which she was so constantly the object ; piqued at everything—at his very letters which were written just in time to save the post, as if writing them had been not a pleasure, but a troublesome little duty which he had put off as long as he possibly could. Everything he did irritated her ; till at last one day her pride conquered her heart, and after a letter, which seemed, if anything, more of a hurried scrawl than ever, she sat down and, in a sudden fit of anger, wrote in terms that admitted of no reply, and no reconciliation. When it was done, she repented ; but her nature could not humble itself, and her repentance had been secret and unavailing.

By this time, however, the old tenderness had starved itself so completely, that she did not even know that the regiment into which Stephen Finch had exchanged, after their engagement had been broken off, was again in England. But though ready for a new venture, her chances had vanished or nearly so ; her friends had fallen off, her worldliness had proved an armour against friendship as well as love, and people had grown tired of inviting her out merely from admiration. Besides her freshness was gone, her face was known, and there was no longer the *éclat* of a new beauty following her. Her father, too, borrowed money of every one and never repaid, even the suggestion of repayment excited his wrath ; so their friends fell off one by one, till they were living alone in lodgings in London, unseen and forgotten, or passed by, she, faded-looking and a little bitter, as disappointed women of her class are apt to be, and her father still with his vague story of the entail, his love of luxury and extravagance which he indulged in at the expense of any one who was duped by his patrician face and good manners into giving him credit.

“ I think Dawson must be feeling his way,” he said to his daughter, a month after the lawyer’s first visit. “ He would not take the trouble to come so often if he were not.”

"No, I suppose not," she answered absently; somehow she was always absent, or bitter or wearied, and but seldom roused up into the fascinating woman of former days.

"The thing is, you see, it wants money; and he is a terrible screw, so I hear, and won't part from it unless it brings an immediate as well as a large profit."

"He has got the money," she said; "I have ascertained that myself, and I can tell you what it is, papa," she exclaimed suddenly, throwing off her absent manner, "we must make a move of some kind soon. The people in the house are positively insolent; it is difficult to get them even to wait upon us. I think we had better find out if this man really means to do anything in this matter, and if he can raise any money on the chance of his being successful, or if he will lend us some. We shall be in the streets soon."

"My dear child, fancy a Stanmore in the streets. But I will stroll down to the club to-day."

"It is no use," she said scornfully, "we have exhausted every one."

"It is shabby of Barker not to have bought that picture," he said, with the air of an injured man. "I really worked so hard to finish it on his account."

"People never buy your pictures when it comes to the point," she said with a little sigh; and he could not contradict her, but turned away and played with some old letters in a little rack on a side table. "Oh; I forgot to tell you," she said presently, "there is a note somewhere from the newsman, to say he cannot send the *Times* any longer, unless the bill is paid. I think we have come to the beginning of an end," she added.

"How disgraceful, after we have had it so long," he said calmly; he was never angry, and did not get bitter at these things as his daughter did. "I shall not deal there any longer once the bill is paid."

"Well; but what are we to do now?" she asked. I mean for our present wants. Another month's rent

will soon be due here, and then, I expect, the woman downstairs will literally turn us out ; the very provisions will stop soon."

" My dear Adelaide," he said as smilingly as ever, " you will really irritate me by your childishness. It is not as if our tradespeople were little shopkeepers, like those at that watering-place—what was it called, Treston-by-the-Sea ; they are respectable people, not everlastingly expecting their bills paid merely because they are due. They know who we are, and that is sufficient ; they have too much respect for us really to annoy us. By the way, my dear, do not forget to order in some more olives, or I will call myself, I shall be in Piccadilly to-day."

" I am certain they won't send them," she answered. " And papa you must think of something ; is there not any one who will lend us a hundred pounds ? I thought people could get money from the Jews ; what does that expression mean ?"

" They all knew us long ago ; no, the only chance I can think of is the lawyer."

" I don't believe he will lend us anything. I don't believe a sixpence would ever come from the lawsuit even if it were gained, and it is not yet begun. Besides the debts would swallow up almost everything."

" I think we had better ask Dawson to dinner."

" Ask him to dinner, what on earth for ?"

" I think it is the best thing we can do. It will please him, and then I will have a serious talk with him."

" I don't know why, but I do hate that man. He makes me shudder, he is so oily and plausible, and I feel as if he has some reason for coming here besides the lawsuit, which I am sure he does not believe in."

" Well, we must find that out, we will settle the matter soon one way or the other, but he has scarcely had time to consider the case in all its bearings ; you see he is a man who likes conversation, and it has taken up the time when he has come."

"You will talk to him so much," she answered contemptuously; "I would not condescend to make an ordinary acquaintance of him."

"Politic, it is politic. I think I will go down to his office this morning, and have a chat, and ask him what day he will come to dine. Then if I see my way clear, I'll ask him if he can advance a hundred or two, or get it for us."

"Can't you ask these questions before we are forced to have him to dinner?"

"Perhaps. Suppose you come down to the city with me, you can talk to Albury and keep the coast clear while I talk to Dawson."

"I can't bear the city," she said peevishly; "but I will walk part of the way with you, and lunch at Lady Mason's, she has asked me often enough to go, so I may as well, though I hate her."

"Very well, I will be home to dinner, and of course you will be back by that time. Why don't you ask Lady Mason to introduce her dressmaker to you?"

"She would not be worth employing," she answered carelessly; "she would not give any credit, fit one badly, and give Lady Mason all the details of every transaction, as Margaret Albury's dressmaker did her. I am very thankful I have got rid of Margaret Albury, with her sarcasm and her hints wrapt up in grim little jokes."

"Still, it is a pity you always quarrel with your friends, my dear; I make it a rule never to throw a friendship away if I can help it."

"But you wear it out, which is the same thing," she answered quickly. "Well, I will go and get ready," she added. "I shall indeed be thankful if you have any success with the lawyer."

"I think it is doubtful," he said to himself as his daughter left the room, "and somehow, I do not like asking him to do it either, it is a bad move altogether."

They sallied forth together, a handsome well-dressed couple; no one looking at them, as they walked up Sloane Street, would have imagined what thorough adventurers

they were. Grant Stanmore left his daughter at Lady Mason's, and went on to the city.

The luncheon was eaten, a drive in the park accomplished, and Lady Mason put Adelaide Stanmore down at her own door by half past four o'clock on the day her father went down to the Old Jewry. He had not returned, but there was a note awaiting her which proved to be from him, and opening it she read—

“**MY DEAR ADELAIDE**,—Dawson was out. Saw Albury, who assures me that he is rolling in money, but an awful miser. I send this to say I shall not be home to dinner, as Barker has asked me to dine down at Cheshunt with him, and give him my opinion on a picture—an opinion he believes to be infallible.

“Your affectionate father,
“**GRANT STANMORE**.”

“He has not got any money yet, then,” was her thought, as she sat down and untied her bonnet strings. “How chilly it is;” she always felt the cold especially in the spring. “They have let the fire out too,” and she rang the bell. “It is something to know that he has money,” she thought; “the thing is, to make him lend us some, or really make a move in this lawsuit. How tired I am of it all. I wonder why they don’t answer the bell.” And she gave another tug at the rope, waited five minutes, then pulled again, a few minutes more and the landlady appeared.

“I rang three times, Mrs. Brown,” she said, angrily; “didn’t you hear me.”

“Yes miss, I heard you fast enough,” the woman said; “but the servant’s out, and I can’t be running up and down stairs; what is it you wanted?”

“I ordered the fire to be kept in; it is quite out, and I am cold.”

“I told Jane not to put any more coals on,” Mrs. Brown answered, raking out the ashes. “If you can afford to pay for the coals as you have them, that is another matter, but I can’t get folks to give me credit. I have to pay my bills as they come due, if I didn’t I

should be summoned, and quite right, too. There is all the coals you've burnt this winter, and not one of them paid for yet; *I've* paid the coal-merchant for them, but *I've* not got my money back."

"Your money is safe enough," Adelaide said, impatiently.

"That may be, but I should like to see it. I've no patience with your stuck-up folks, giving themselves airs, and not paying for them," she muttered.

"I shall be obliged by your lighting the fire, or sending the servant to do it, Mrs. Brown, and by your leaving the room," Adelaide Stanmore said, looking scornfully at the woman, till she was cowed. "And if you are dissatisfied, I will ask my father to pay your bill, and we will leave your house." There were two red spots in her face, and her eyes flashed; her heart might be cowardly, but her manner never turned betrayer to her feelings.

"I didn't mean that exactly, but of course I want my money," the woman answered, subdued. "It isn't that I want you to go, but I must be paid like other folks, and, moreover, I do expect people that are beholden to one for credit to be civil."

"When you have seen about the fire, perhaps you will go downstairs," was the rejoinder, and she passed the indignant landlady, and went upstairs to her own room; and when she descended half-an-hour later there was a bright fire burning, the cloth was laid for dinner, and Adelaide Stanmore knew that, in her battle with Mrs. Brown, she had been the victor. She struggled wearily through her dinner an hour later; the things were cleared away; she refused to have the dessert put on the table, but wrapping a shawl round her shoulders after her favourite manner, she drew an easy chair close to the fire, and thought for an hour or so, just as many a time Polly Dawson had sat and thought in the dining-room at Kensington.

CHAPTER VII.

ADELAIDE TALKS TO THE LAWYER.



HE thought over the past as she sat by the fire that evening. She had had a happy and luxurious childhood. While her mother lived, there had been plenty of money, a large house in the best part of the town, carriages and servants. Gradually the carriages and servants were reduced in number, but still there seemed fair wealth. The expensive governess who took care of her education was sent away, and a cheaper one procured, and there were family quarrels. Then her mother died. More changes followed, and more quarrels, and at last everything disappeared, and she and her father were living alone in a pretty cottage at Treston-by-the-Sea. There, through the introduction of some mutual friends, she had known Stephen Finch; she lingered tenderly for a moment over the remembrance of that year; only for a moment though, and she shook it off, and followed her own life and her father's, from the time when they left the cottage by the sea. They came to London and lived during the following four or five years on the fragments of fortune, reputation, and credit left to them, hanging on to society till it shook them off, but so gradually and gently, they scarcely knew when they had lost their hold. Since then, living decently had been hard work to them. Some few tradesmen, deceived by their appearance, or, perhaps, remembering their name and former position, still trusted them, but their patience was fast getting exhausted. Ready money was a luxury which latterly had been almost unknown to them, even her jewellery had vanished on

occasions when all other attempts to raise funds had failed; but now their most desperate resources had come to an end, the patience of their most generous acquaintance was exhausted. She had not the faintest idea where their next five-pound-note was to come from, their credit was fast failing, and they had literally nothing but beggary before them. Good manners and address go a long way, but they had used even them up. They had no relations to help them, they had quarrelled with them all; they had no friends, they had tired them all out; they were as much alone in London—save for the few acquaintances Grant Stanmore met at his club, and the one or two on whom, at long intervals, his daughter called—as they would have been on the plains of Tartary. They knew a good many people whom they still bowed to; but that was all.

In wrathful moments their landlady designated the Stanmores as “beggars on horseback,” and she was not far wrong. They not merely required the necessities, but absolutely could not exist without the luxuries of life; and they had that ridiculous idea of their own importance, which somehow clings to many West Indian people. To Adelaide luxury and riches formed the sum of human happiness, the natural aim of human ambition. All her life she had looked upon her friends, when she possessed them, as beings made to be useful and profitable; their houses as places to stay and be comfortable in; and their friendship as a satisfactory and sufficient reason for their doing all in their power, at any inconvenience to themselves, to contribute to her comfort. At the present moment she was almost desperate for money, and there was nothing, not positively degrading, she would not have done to obtain it. She would have done it scornfully and wearily; nay, she might have been tortured by the means she was obliged to adopt to gain it, but she would not have faltered. She fretted and pined for luxury. Ease and comfort, a good table, and nice dress, would have compensated her for anything; would have made a world in them-

selves for her. All her weariness, she thought, all her bitterness, all her impatient restlessness, arose from her poverty ; all her disappointments, all her crosses, she attributed to it. Probably it had actually a good deal less to do with her wasted life than she imagined. Had she suddenly possessed all she sighed for, she would hardly have been a contented woman. She had made her whole life a mistake, and there was no rectifying it ; there was, and ever would be, an everlasting craving at her heart for something, she did not know what, save that she never gained it. Yet she was right in thinking money would do a great deal for her ; now her life was objectless and aching ; with money her vanity, at any rate, would have found food. There was a great deal of resolution in her character, and there was a little bit of dare-devil spirit, that once roused, would have helped her to do almost anything to effect any end she had in view. There was no good in her, but no positive wickedness ; perhaps, because anything so troublesome and inconvenient as positive wickedness in any shape always is, sooner or later, could not have possessed any temptation for her. She was very miserable as she sat alone that evening in the Pimlico lodgings. She was lonely, and wretched, and discontented, perfectly without hope, and full of fear for the future ; feeling as if she had drained life to the dregs, and there was nothing left to do but to wait, with the bitter taste in her mouth, till dying time came. She seldom cried, so she had no tears to solace herself with as she brooded drearily over her troubles. She only stared vacantly into the fire, neither seeing nor hearing anything around her, and with the weight of all she felt so hard to bear, pressing heavily down upon her till her face looked old, and haggard, and careworn. Could they have seen her,—those who remembered her proud and beautiful, with the strange charm she always had for all but those who knew her well, they would not have recognised her as the same woman, who only a few years before was the belle

of every room she entered, and the talk and admiration of people wherever she went.

An hour passed, and the fire burnt a little hollow, but she did not know it. The door opened softly, but she remained lost in her reverie till a voice said—the soft oily voice which she had hated from the first moment she had heard it—

“Miss Stanmore, I beg your pardon”—with a start she rose to her feet.

“Mr. Dawson!” she exclaimed.

“I came in with some one, the servant, I think, who entered with a latch-key,” he said humbly. “And I was told to come up, I did not know you were alone; I knocked at the door, but no one answered, and so I ventured to enter.”

“Papa is not at home,” she said shortly, taking no notice whatever of his apology.

“I am very sorry,” he said softly; “I came to have a business chat with him. We have really hardly entered upon the matter yet, and the time—”

“Will you sit down,” she said more civilly. “Perhaps I can assist you nearly as much as my father. I have heard the whole history a thousand times over, and ought to know it pretty well.”

“Will you really!” he said, blandly and smilingly. “Will you really, my dear young lady, this is indeed kind.” He sat down, folding his hands and waiting for her to begin. His manner was the same as ever; but he felt strange and awkward as he waited for what she would say next, and his usual flow of platitudes seemed ebbing away, and with them his courage. There was something in her manner, and in the very tone of her voice, that awed him, and told him that she considered him an inferior being, who was only endured because he might be useful; and yet there was something in this strange woman, he could not tell what, which made him feel humble and obedient, and flattered that she descended to endure him on any terms. She roused herself a little, and then proceeded, in a clear voice and a quiet

methodical manner, to give him the history concerning the West Indian entail, staying here and there to impress upon him the points that could be strengthened by letters or papers in the possession of her father. She told the story well; she would have made a splendid special pleader when once roused up and warmed to her subject, and her voice was plaintive and sweet-toned and sympathetic, and towards the end of the history she became eager and forgot her apathy, almost forgot the inward contempt she felt for her listener.

There seemed to the lawyer an excellent chance of the estates coming to Grant Stanmore, without the interference of the law. Alfred Stanmore was a widower and had only one child, a delicate boy; he thought of Jack with a tinge of the sickly pain which the remembrance always brought him, and considered that the son would probably die.

"But Alfred Stanmore is some years younger than my father, Mr. Dawson," Adelaide Stanmore said, "so that we cannot afford to let things take their natural course, and if the boy does die," she continued coldly, "my uncle may marry again. I think it is very probable he will, if he loses the child—or, indeed, in any case."

"True," he answered; "he would be so lonely without him;" and there was more truth in the sentiment in his voice than his listener supposed. "But the supposition that he quietly took possession of the estates, without troubling to announce it or to seek for any will at all, is the one we must first investigate. Probably there was a will in his favour, or no will at all: he would hardly act in opposition to one."

"Certainly not," she answered; "he is not likely to have flown in the face of one—and I do not believe he is a scoundrel." She looked him full in the face, and he could not meet her eyes, feeling almost as if she had brought some sudden accusation against him. "I am sure he believed himself justified for the course he has taken, the thing is to prove that he is wrong."

"It would take a long time and a great deal of money," he began.

"But the recompense would be very large in case of success," she said quickly; she understood his calculating nature perfectly, though she had seen so little of him.

"And you expect this case to be taken up on a speculation?"

"Quite on a speculation."

"I do not think I should care to risk it," he said, hesitatingly, while she turned impatiently towards the fire; "it is too great a chance."

"Then it is useless our further discussing the matter," she said, haughtily, almost in the tone of a dismissal.

"But, if any one would advance me sufficient money, my dear Miss Stanmore," he went on almost in a despairing voice.

"You must find that person then, Mr. Dawson. We know of no one who will do it;" and she turned away.

"But you know many people, grand people; I have heard your father speak of his many influential friends."

"Oh, yes; excellent friends indeed," she answered bitterly, "while we did not want anything from them, and they could in many ways make us useful. No; there is no one. If you take up the case you must find the money for it; if you lose it is your loss and ours, if you win, you gain half of what is won, if you like. We are desperate for money, even to go on living with, so you may be sure we have none to spend upon law."

"But if I cannot advance the money, or think it would be throwing away any sum I *might* succeed in getting, for the purpose of carrying on the lawsuit?"

"Then once more we have no occasion to discuss the matter, Mr. Dawson; you must be tired of it," she went on half-sadly, "and I have been so for years." She allowed no half-measures, he saw that, and that he must give, before he left the house, some strong hope of his taking up the case, or make up his mind not to enter it

again. Inwardly the lawyer was fighting a battle with himself. He did not know why it was ; but this woman had a strange power, in a sense the mastery over him. He felt that she disliked him, and despised him, that she only intended to make use of him, and to dismiss him if he refused to be useful, and yet he could not go, could not withstand the fascination she had for him. He could have cringed to her, and knelt to her, and would have given anything in the world for her civility. She seemed a kind of superior being to him, beautiful beyond all measure, a creature to treat with respect, and who was of quite another order of human beings from that to which he belonged. "Do you think it is hopeless, as you have heard me relate it?" she asked, after an uncomfortable silence on both sides.

"No—no," he answered trembling and confused ; he had forgotten the whole story of the West Indian entail, as he had sat looking at her, while she, with her face turned from him, had fixed her gaze upon the fire.

"Then you will see what you can do for us, I suppose?" she said coldly, and as if to put an end to the interview. Then half-beseechingly, half-fawningly, he answered, still evidently held in check by her manner.

"I will come again, and talk it over with your father, Miss Stanmore."

"There is no use in your coming, or talking it over unless you have an idea of taking up the case." She was getting tired of the subject, and tired of her listener, and the old weary look was on her face, the look which had been upon it when he first saw her on the evening when he had walked home, thinking of Jack. And when he saw it again the sense of loneliness, and aching, which he had felt then came over him again, and he forgot everything else.

"I do think of taking it up," he answered slowly. A little eagerness flashed back into her eyes.

"You do really?" She felt as if she had been sailing on a dull and dreary sea, and through the mist and

haze had caught one glimpse of something that might be land at last.

"You are very anxious to have the question tried, Miss Stanmore," he said in surprise; still watching her, and yet half afraid to do so. She forgot her dislike and contempt for him for a moment, after he said the words which were such a consolation to her, and she answered him readily.

"Yes, I am *very* eager to have it tried."

"Why?" He was forgetting himself, and his own life-long struggle, as he sat there alone with her; she had become animated, had altered altogether, since she felt she had in part gained her point.

"Why because I hate poverty. I have never been used to it, I cannot endure it, it kills me!"

"Money is a great deal," he said; he never quite owned even to himself how much it was to him.

"A great deal," she answered, impatiently. "It is everything. Money and position, and the one is the prop of the other. When will you set about the case, Mr. Dawson?"

"I am *very* busy—I will as soon as I can," he answered shirkingly, and softly. "There is not such an immediate necessity—"

"Yes, there is," she answered. "You must set about it at once. Haven't I told you how much we depend upon it? we are almost at your mercy, Mr. Dawson; but unless you begin at once, it is useless, and may as well be left alone." She was scornful again, and almost authoritative: with a nature like Henry Dawson's it was the manner which gained the easiest victory.

"I would do anything in the world for you, my dear young lady," he began; and almost without knowing it he stretched forth his hand and touched the white fingers of his companion, as they toyed restlessly with the leaves of a book lying upon the table. She started, and withdrew them with disgust rather than anger, and almost shrinking away from him; and wrapping her shawl closer round her, she rose at once and said—

"You had better come again and talk it over with my father." Then he answered almost tremblingly—

"I shall only do it for you, Miss Stanmore—only for you;" but she stood facing him unflinchingly.

"My father will be happy to talk matters over with you, Mr. Dawson," and as she spoke the door opened and Grant Stanmore entered. She sat down into her chair with a sigh of relief, while the lawyer stood nervously waiting for what would come next.

"Mr. Dawson, ah, my dear sir, I am glad to see you. I called at the Old Jewry to-day; but you were out."

"Yes; that is why I came this evening."

"So good of you," was the bland answer. "I have been down to Cheshunt, a pleasant place, had an early dinner with Sir George Barker, and returned, thinking my daughter would be lonely."

"I have been giving Mr. Dawson some business details," she said, looking up. "He has decided upon investigating the case, papa; therefore you had better put him in possession of all the letters and documents you have, as he will begin going through them at once."

"Indeed; indeed! I am delighted you have determined upon this course; let us shake hands to our mutual success, Mr. Dawson, and pray sit down." Grant Stanmore's spirits rose so greatly at his daughter's words that he could have embraced the lawyer on the spot, had it appeared to him that it would be a wise or laudable proceeding. But Henry Dawson was still nervous inwardly, though outwardly he had recovered his ease, and began to see that in his interview with Miss Stanmore he had met with his match.

"You must excuse me, my dear sir," he said; "but I will return some other evening. I, too, have a daughter waiting for me at home. I will go through the matter shortly. My daughter will be waiting for me too," he repeated, a little entreatingly. He fancied it seemed

interesting to speak of his daughter, and somehow he was getting afraid of these people.

"Ah, yes, to be sure. Come and dine, just in a very quiet way, any day this week." The lawyer feebly began to make an excuse; but the other was in high glee, and would not hear of it. "Nay, I will take no apology," he said. "Name your own day; when shall it be? just ourselves, you know." Then against his will, and yet flattered, the lawyer agreed to come and dine on the following Wednesday.

So the lawyer tasted of that cup which he had held to the lips of all he had come in contact with through life, and that with which he had influenced others now in turn influenced him.

CHAPTER VIII.

MARGARET TALKS TO POLLY.



R. BRANDFORD is in town. He called on us yesterday," Margaret Albury told Polly, thinking it would be news. She had dropped in to see her after a longer interval than usual.

"I am so glad," Polly answered. "He said he was coming; but he is not at all good at paying visits."

"He has been to see you, then?"

"Oh, yes; a great many times," Polly answered beamingly. "Why he has been three afternoons this week."

Richard Brandford's visits had increased at a rapid rate lately. Somehow his footsteps turned almost unconsciously towards the dingy house in the afternoon.

"What for?"

"Why to see me," said Polly. It was the most natural thing in the world, she thought, for Richard Brandford to come; and yet for some unknown reason she added, as if in excuse, "he knew mamma, you know." Polly had learnt to speak of her mother calmly enough, to keep her in her thoughts, and bring her into her conversation, if necessary, lovingly and reverently, as if she lived in a far-off land, just as Margaret Albury had told her she could if she tried; and the result had been that to Polly her mother was living, though far away, and out of reach, but yet not dead, as those seem dead whose names are never on our lips, and only on sad sufferance in thoughts.

"That is a great reason for coming to see you, of

course?" Margaret Albury said, in her most rasping voice. "What does he talk about?"

"All kinds of things; books, you know, and places, and—oh anything!"

"Then he doesn't make love to you?" The colour rushed into Polly's face.

"Make love to me, no;" and she knew she had told the truth, and yet felt guilty. "Mr. Brandford is not a man to make love to any one," she added, awkwardly.

"I daresay not."

"I don't believe he would make love even if he fell in love with any one," she went on still more awkwardly, her cheeks burning.

"What do you suppose he would do, then?"

"I don't know, I am sure. I don't believe he would show what he felt."

"Then it doesn't matter in the least what he feels?"

"Yes it does, it matters a great deal—at least, I daresay it does to some people."

"Oh, nonsense!" said Miss Albury, impatiently. "Unless one shows what one feels, it doesn't matter a bit. I would just as soon you hate me as love me, if you make no sign. Hate and love that speak no language are harmless and useless. I never believe in your fine folk who pretend to feel a great deal, and brood over it in silence. I don't believe they really feel anything except a good deal of secret vanity, which does find language in their lives somehow without their knowing it. I knew a man once who simply broke a woman's heart in that way. She loved him dearly, and he in his way loved her, at least he thought he did; he found some scrap or crumb of liking for her in his heart, and he gratified his vanity by thinking what a fine feeling it was, and how grandly he loved her—though he treated her so coldly she could never suspect it. She broke her heart for him at last and died, and he went on brooding over that fine love of his all his days, thinking how true he was and how well he loved her, and yet never made a sign. I would have had him hanged. He

killed her, as surely as if he had starved her to death," Margaret Albury said, bitterly.

"But what makes you say all this to me?" asked Polly; her eyes flashing, and a strange feeling of dread at her heart.

"I don't know, unless it is that I suspect Mr. Richard Brandford is something of this manner of man."

"And if he is, what is it to me?"

"That you know better than I, Polly."

"Tell me what he said yesterday," Polly said; taking no notice of Margaret Albury's last remark, and trying to change the subject.

"He did not say much. Mr. Sandon was there—Sandon of the *All Round Review*, the man who writes biting articles against all popular movements, and has bitten his way into notoriety. He is one of the men of the day, I suppose, but he fancies himself one of the men of the century; a little earth will alike cover himself and his fame in the end. He talked and Richard Brandford listened. Does he talk much to you, Polly?"

"What, Mr. Brandford? Why yes, a great deal."

"And do you find him companionable and sympathetic, and all that?"

"Very."

"I'm glad to hear it. I fancied he kept his soul locked up in a cupboard, and gloated over it. But I'm glad to hear it's only my pique at not being able to get at him myself, that makes me think it. Somehow I never can do any conversation, not even the very smallest talk with him."

"Don't you like him?" asked Polly; and, unconsciously, there was a shade of indignation in her voice.

"Yes, I do. I always have a slight feeling of disappointment about him, caused, perhaps, by the fact that he doesn't talk to me much. But he is distinctly fascinating."

"Yes, he is," Polly said, thoughtfully. "I wonder why he is. Do you think it is because one feels he is

truthful and kind, and has intellectual tastes and a sense of humour?"

"What a catalogue! Not bad either for you, Polly. No; I'll tell you what it is. One somehow feels, he is capable of being very much greater than he is, or chooses to take the trouble of being, or probably, ever will be."

"He seems to me great now," said Polly softly. "I don't think he could be much greater. He might be more constantly proving his greatness, of course."

"It is in the proof that the greatness consists. It is no use saying you know a language, if you don't speak it when you are in its land. It is of no use being great, unless your greatness is of use to the world, any more than it is of use being a lump of coal in a mine, until you are dug up. A great teacher said, 'Thought is powerless unless it creates something outside itself;' and a philosopher and a ploughboy are on the same level as concerns the world, until the former makes a sign. But I must go, and there is something I want to say to you, Polly dear—you mustn't let Richard Brandford go on spending his afternoons here. It is wrong."

"Wrong?" she exclaimed.

"Yes, wrong. He's a man, and you are a pretty woman, and young—"

"But that has nothing to do with it," Polly said; the tears filling her eyes.

"It has a great deal to do with it, Polly. He would not come, if you had a glass eye and a hump on your back. You can be certain of that."

"But we only talk about books and music, and—"

"Oh yes, I know, and the rest of it," she said, almost sadly. "I wouldn't interfere with you, Polly dear," she went on in a gentle voice, "but your mother is not here to take care of you, and I am older than you, and like you. I fear your poor little heart has gone as it is. I only hope he is in love with you, and will declare himself—"

"He is not in love with me, and of course he won't declare himself," Polly said quickly. "I am sure there cannot be any harm in it. Explain why it is wrong; tell me why you think it is wrong, Margaret."

"I don't know," she answered thoughtfully. "I feel it is wrong, but I can hardly put that feeling into definite thoughts, much less into words. I suppose, because there are certain things society has found from experience to be good for it. And these things have become social law, and one is bound, as far as one can, and for the sake of society, to keep even the unwritten laws of the State one lives in. At any rate, you are not the person to fly in the face of them, Polly."

"But no one knows he comes—no one can be shocked or follow a bad example—"

"Example is like a grain of mustard, dropped without our knowledge—"

"And oh! I should never see him any more," she cried, passionately.

"You will if he cares for you. But it is not a question of the consequence, it is the question of right and wrong that you have to consider; what you would lose by doing right, or gain by doing wrong, must not enter your thoughts in considering that." Polly could not answer, and her visitor went on gently enough, "You are your own mistress, dear, it is for yourself to decide."

"Of course I shall do what is right," Polly said softly. "I would not do wrong if I knew it for all the world. But I wish I hadn't known it was wrong, then we could have gone on seeing each other just the same," and she gave a long sigh as she looked sadly back on her lost ignorance.

She sat and thought about it after Margaret Albury had gone, and tried over and over again to rehearse what she would say. She never dreamt of telling him anything but the simple truth. There was no prevarication about Polly, but it was very, very difficult to think of words with which to say that truth gently.

She took up a book he and she had been reading yesterday, and looked idly at the pages. Suddenly something fell to the ground from between the leaves. She picked it up, it was a little gold pencil case, she remembered it well, he had corrected a misprint with it, and had forgotten to put it into his pocket. Perhaps he would miss it, she thought, and come for it, and she waited nervously all through the long afternoon, but he did not come. "He will be sure to come to-morrow," she said at last, when she gave up all hope of seeing him that day; and she reflected that when he came, she herself would have to banish him, and yet in her heart there was a wild feverish hope she did not dare encourage, that what she was going to do would prove if he did care for her. If he did care for her! It was too wonderful to think of, and that, even if he did care for her, anything should lie beyond or come of it did not for a moment enter into Polly's unsophisticated imagination.

CHAPTER IX.

DURING THE STORM.



ICHARD BRANDFORD came the next day, as Polly felt and half dreaded he would. She thought she knew perfectly what she was going to say, but when she saw him all her planned speech was forgotten, and she sat waiting, hesitating, and confused, her heart finding a dozen excuses for not making any speech at all, but her head contradicting them all. He was quieter than usual that day. Somehow silence had come over them both lately, and he sat turning over the leaves of the books he had brought for her to read, while she looked half fearfully out at the window. The sky was darkening, and a thunder-storm was evidently on its way.

“Oh, I have your pencil-case,” she exclaimed suddenly; glad of a little respite. “You left it in one of our books.” She noticed vaguely how pleased he looked.

“I am glad you have found it,” he answered. “I was afraid that I had lost it in the street.”

“It is a pretty little pencil-case.”

“Yes, and it was given to me by a pretty girl,” he said.

“Who was that?” as carelessly as possible. Polly was always ready to be a shade jealous, and he knew it, and liked to make her so.

“Clare Clayton. She gave it to me on my birthday.”

“Does she always give you a birthday present?”

“Well, no; but she did this year.”

“Oh!”

"By the way, I am going back to Benthwaite in about ten days' time."

"For good?" she asked; her heart sinking.

"No, for an important event, if you call that going for good. I shall be back in town before the end of the season. I don't suppose I shall be away more than a month." She wondered what he was going for, but somehow she was always afraid of asking him questions, and he never told her anything about his people. Then she could not help thinking that perhaps she might let him go on coming just for the one fortnight he would be in town, but she checked herself in a minute. It was of no use being a coward; she hated cowards, and she meant to do what was right in life, and she would not go on doing a thing that she had been told was wrong. She looked out at the darkening sky.

"I think we are going to have a dreadful storm," she said, and went to the window; and he, closing his book, followed her. Then suddenly there came a flash of lightning, and she drew back in dismay.

"Are you afraid?" he asked; drawing near as if to protect her. "I like to look at a thunderstorm."

"So do I; yet it always affects me. It is not that I am afraid;" she was trembling a little, as he could see, and she was not looking out at the gathering clouds. She seemed to be rather afraid at her own thoughts; and her eyes were cast down, and her hands held nervously together. She had a different face from usual; it was frightened and grave.

"Have you bought your Clytie yet?" he asked suddenly. Polly was bargaining with a wandering Italian one day when he appeared, and the man had promised to bring her a sixpenny cast of Clytie next time he came.

"No."

"Let me see, what was she changed into; some flower, was it not?" Of course he knew perfectly, but he liked to hear Polly talk.

"A sunflower," she answered, gravely. "You know that is the reason that flower turns its head to the sun: in token of its constancy. I always like the sunflower for Clytie's sake."

"What do you know about constancy, little goose?"

"Nothing, I suppose."

"So I suppose—nothing;" but, as he spoke, he thought vaguely once more of her good-bye long ago, of the happy face which welcomed him back to town, and the frightened eyes that could not meet his own to-day. How could he help wondering whether constancy was not a thing of which she knew, at any rate, more than "nothing?" He was silent a little while, feeling that, do what he would, this girl had twined herself into his life; had, with her smiles and tears, her pouting and coquetry, gradually crept into his world, and framed herself in his memory. He had no thought then of ever letting her know this; of their ever being more to each other than they were, as they stood together there at that moment. Had he told her that he loved her, he would have felt that he was expected, nay, bound to go on loving her; and being bound to love her would, he fancied, be sufficient to make him hate her. He did not know, how little would have satisfied her, then, at any rate; how much idealism and hero-worship were still mixed up with her feeling for him, and they look for and demand no return. He did not know how content she would have been to go through life by his side, sunning herself in his smiles, and when they were not given, resting in the shade to remember them, patiently waiting till it pleased him to make her happy again; how she would have expected nothing, asked for nothing, glad to have him in her sight, to hear his voice, and touch his hand; making him her happiness, her hope, her world; giving him all, and seeking from him nothing, save when he chose to give. He never troubled himself to consider whether, having suffered her to become what daily she was becoming to him, it would be easy with one

wrench to put her from him ; he never even thought of the necessity or possibility of his doing so, but lived only in the present, just as she herself tried to do. Still less did it occur to him to ask himself, whether he was acting honourably or justly towards the girl, who stood almost leaning upon him, vainly trying to disguise her terror at the storm. He never stayed to think what right he had had to come into her quiet, even-flowing life, gathering all its sweetness into his own hands, gaining for himself a power to give, and a power to take so great, that all her happiness, nay, her very existence, was at his mercy ; becoming to her the realisation of an ideal which almost every woman has at heart, together with a vague unconscious yearning for that which, sooner or later, probably forms the sum of her happiness. She herself scarcely understood how much her love for him had grown upon her, till, that afternoon, when she stood, fearfully watching the storm, trying to gather courage to say the words which would banish him for ever from the dingy house—that blessed, dingy house, in which she had first learnt to care for him.

“ Mr. Brandford,” she said, suddenly ; “ I want to ask you something ? ”

“ I thought I told you not to call me Mr. Brandford.”

“ I know,” she answered, humbly ; “ but I cannot say the other.” She had never yet called him by his first name.

“ Well, what do you want to ask ? ” and he looked down at her. Then she faltered. Surely she had chosen the very worst moment in the world for her task. If he only had kept his head turned in the other direction, or, if he had only not been standing so near to her, she could have gone bravely on.

“ I wanted to ask—you—not—to—come—here—any—more,” she said, slowly.

“ Why ? Do you not like me to come ? ”

“ Oh yes ! ” she answered, quickly and eagerly.

"Well, what is it, then?" with a hazy notion of the truth.

"Margaret Albury said it was wrong, and that"—it was very difficult to go on.

"And that' what?"

"And that I ought not to let any one—I mean any one—that—is a—man"—she was getting terribly confused—"come and see me, because you know I am all alone." She had got the words out at last, but they were dreadful ones to say.

"Well?"

Well! was that all that he had to say? She was choking, and could not open her lips again, and waited tremblingly; but he only stood still, quietly staring at her, and then looked out at the storm again. She raised her hands after a moment or two with a little gesture of impatience. Then he spoke.

"Is Miss Albury your authority on matters of propriety?" he asked, coldly, almost cynically, for Polly seemed to have acquired an air of common worldliness, in his eyes, in her sudden regard for appearance. It had been one of her greatest charms for him, not only that she seemed incapable of wrong, but wholly unconscious of its existence.

"No," she said huskily.

"And cannot you judge for yourself," he asked. "Do you think there is any harm in my coming here, now and then, for an hour or two, and talking with you about books and so on? I hate your scandal-loving human beings who see wrong in anything, and there is something contemptible in the everlasting fear of Mrs. Grundy. Knowing one is not doing wrong ought to be sufficient, and there has been none in my coming to see you, Polly." Yet he knew, as he said it, that there would be in the future, now that they had both seen its possibility. "However, I shall not come any more, since it subjects you to unpleasant remarks."

"Oh no, don't say that!" and she clasped her hands and looked up at him with her face burning, and her

eyes flashing, through her tears, with a sudden light in them. "I do not care what she says, what any one says, if *you* say it is not wrong. You shall judge. *I* never dreamt that it was so. It never even entered into my head to think of such a thing."

"I don't believe it did," he said to himself rather than to her.

"You must know better than I, or than Margaret Albury, and if there is no harm in it, come just the same, and do not think of what I have said—and don't be angry, I did not mean—I did not know what to do. You are not angry, are you?" And in her excitement she put her hand for a moment on his arm, and then hurriedly drew it back, waiting breathlessly for him to speak.

"Angry," he said soothingly, almost tenderly. "Why should I be angry with you? There, go and sit down in your favourite arm-chair, and be quiet for a little while."

She gave a sigh of relief which his tone had brought her, and sat down patiently waiting till he should come and speak to her. She had said her say, that was one thing, and surely, he would know what was best and right to do, only she wished with all her heart and soul that Margaret Albury had kept her distance. And if he never came again! The very thought brought tears into her eyes, but she stealthily wiped them away before he could turn round. She felt very like a prisoner waiting for her sentence, as she cowered down into the depths of the old chair, out of his sight, and away from the flashes of lightning. Then she thought of her mother and Jack, and the life which had been months ago, before this wild love came into her heart. "Oh, if mamma had only been here," she thought; and forgetting Richard Brandford, and the storm, and all that was, her thoughts travelled back to all that used to be; to her mother's little vanities, and pleasures, and troubles, her delight in all that was "so pretty," the walks they took, the things they used to long for, and the tart or

bun they had now and then bought, and thinking it a great treat, eaten together like two school-girls, or the bit of ribbon which by a great effort they had managed to afford. It had been a quiet narrow life, with no strong lights upon it, but then, there had been no very deep shadows, and she had been satisfied, because she had not known of any thing beyond.

Richard Brandford stood by the window for almost a quarter of an hour, considering over all Polly had said, and angry as he was at any remarks made upon his actions and ideas, which, though tolerably broad, were nevertheless strict, he could not help acknowledging to himself that there was a good deal of sense in Margaret Albury's assertion. He ought to have thought long ago of the danger to Polly involved in his constant visits to her, but having no thought of wrong he had simply forgotten its possibility. What he was most angry at was the manner in which Miss Albury had thought proper to play her part, teaching that simple pure-minded girl right from wrong, when her very ignorance had been sufficient to protect her from the latter. It was not till the storm had almost passed, that he stopped in his considering, to remember the subject of it quietly sitting behind him. Then he went to her side.

"Polly," he said.

"Yes," and she rose to her feet almost startled.

"I have been thinking that perhaps it will be better for me not to come here again."

"Oh," she said blankly. The word was rather long drawn out, and the tone a little mournful, but she could not help it.

"It does not mean that we are to say good-bye, you know. We can have a walk together sometimes, there is no harm in that."

"No, I suppose not;" and she looked round the room in which she had spent so many happy hours. To think that she herself had banished him from it.

"It is getting late too," he said. "So I must be off."

"Oh no," she said entreatingly, raising her eyes, for the first time since he had been speaking. "Oh no, not now, when it will be the last time you will be here." After all, she was much more of a child than a woman, he thought. Certainly no other woman could have used the same words in such perfect ignorance and innocence as she did.

"I am not going now, for any other reason than that it is getting late," he said. "I have been here more than two hours. I don't know what Miss Albury would say to that."

"I don't care," she exclaimed; "I don't mind in the least what anyone says, if it is not wrong——"

"You must," he said firmly, but kindly. "A woman must conform to a certain number of the world's ideas. You will find that out as you grow older, Polly. I do not care a straw for conventionality myself; but it will not do for you to despise it. If it only concerned me, Miss Albury might say what she pleased; but when it concerns you it is quite another matter, besides she is only an echo of the world, and I would not place you in an awkward position on any account. I ought to have thought of it before, only I trouble myself little about manners and customs."

"Very well," she said softly and sweetly. "If you think it is right let it be so."

"I am quite sure it is right," he answered gently. "Good-bye, dear, we shall see each other sometimes yet;" and he stooped and kissed her, and she forgot to be angry, and had none of the indignation which had been so ready for poor Robert Welch, only tremblingly, murmured——

"You shouldn't, oh, you shouldn't!" and before she could look up again, he had left the room and let himself out at the street door. She sat down in the easy chair once more, and covering her ashamed face with her hands thought over the history of that afternoon, and wondered at it all. Presently with a little sigh, she moved her hands, and almost felt as if it had

been a dream. Then for the first time, there crept into her heart a thought which she did not dare acknowledge, much less encourage. "Can *he* love *me*? Oh, no, no, he cannot," she thought. "And yet"—and her cheeks burnt again, and a strange happiness came flashing for a moment into her life—"does any one in the world ever kiss any one he doesn't love!"

CHAPTER X.

HOW POLLY WENT TO EALING.



T was useless to struggle against fate. Little by little the stray links had woven into a strong chain, and Richard Brandford, dreaming idly over his books, realised at last that he was in love with Polly Dawson. And he began to think that it would be very nice to go through life with the gipsy face by his side. It is very pleasant to be loved, and though he was not conceited, he could not help feeling that this girl did love him. She was very lovable, he thought, as he sat thinking it all over, four days after Polly had banished him from the dingy house, not very clever perhaps; but men of the Richard Brandford type do not want more than quickness, and intelligence, a wife to love, and to love them, a woman whose sweet tones, and sunny smiles, and thoughtful ways will make up a home.

It was odd how long these four days, in which he had seen and heard nothing of her, had seemed. He was angry with himself that he cared so much about it; but still the fact remained.

The next morning Polly had a letter. This is what it said:—

“**MY DEAR POLLY**,—I have no doubt the course we are pursuing is very excellent, and edifying; but I should like to tell you of an idea that has occurred to me lately. I don’t know if Miss Albury would think it a great crime, if we took a walk together, while I propound it. Don’t you think that if to-morrow is fine we might have a walk across the park? Shall I call for you in the afternoon?

“Ever yours,
“R.”

He knew perfectly what the idea was, and he was curiously excited, when he found out that he had made up his mind to propose to her; but he could not bring

himself all at once to write a love-letter. So he put the initial of his first name only at the end of his letter, and felt half-amused and half-ashamed when he had done it ; but he thought, it looked a little more suggestive than his usual signature. Anyhow it was more than he had ever done to a woman before. It told, too, he knew that in a moment, when he got Polly's answer, which had no beginning at all, but simply said she could not go for a walk to-morrow, because in the morning quite early, she was going to say good-bye to her aunt and cousins at Ealing, who were going abroad, and she was to stay all night ; but after that she should like a walk very much indeed. He read the little letter half-a-dozen times, and laughed to himself. He was quite happy, now that he had made up his mind ; but he was very vexed that the walk was put off. Then suddenly he hunted about for his "Bradshaw," and finding it, looked up the trains for Ealing.

"She's certain to go about eleven, I should say," he thought ; and somehow the next morning he was to be seen hanging about the station, and at five minutes to eleven he was rewarded by a sight of the figure he knew so well.

"Polly," he said, coming unseen to her side ; and she started and said "Oh !" just as she always did, and flushed with pleasure, and he saw the flush and understood it, and loved her for it.

"I did not think you would be here," she said.

"No ; I know you didn't," he answered ; "that is why I came."

"But we can't have a walk here," she laughed. He noticed that her eyes never once met his ; but she could not help remembering, and he knew that she remembered, the kiss he had given her last time, and Polly was ashamed.

"I know that also ; but I thought I should like to run down to Ealing with you, and we can have a stroll there, and then I can walk back. I suppose they won't come to meet you ?"

"No;" but she thought it would not be much of a walk, for the house was only a quarter of a mile from the station.

"Or we might get out at Acton, and find our way through some fields to Ealing. That wouldn't be bad."

"Oh, it would be so nice!" she exclaimed; for she had all Jack's love of the country.

"Very well; we'll do that."

And Polly was so astonished at finding him there, and that she was really going to have a country walk with him, that she forgot all about taking her ticket until the last moment, and then, while she was fumbling for her purse, which she always carefully hid in her dress—though the average sum it contained was three and sixpence—he took tickets for each of them as a matter of course, at which she coloured and felt awkward, for she reflected that she ought to have taken her own.

They got into an empty carriage, and when they were comfortably off, the magnificent sum he had paid for her fare again dwelt heavily on her mind. "I ought to pay him back," she thought, "or say something about it at any rate. First-class carriages are very nice, I would always travel in them if I could," forgetting that as a rule she never travelled at all. It is always awkward for a woman to speak to a man about money affairs, and Polly, unused to the ways of the world, and utterly ignorant that the happiness of defraying small expenses for young ladies, who usually look perfectly unconscious of the proceeding, is one of the advantages of the sterner sex, found it doubly so.

"Mr. ——" she began at last, then stopped and looked confused, and hesitated.

"Miss ——" he answered, opening his eyes at her in amusement.

"I wish you wouldn't," she said; the recollection of that unfortunate payment vanishing in her indignation at his presuming to mimic her.

"Wouldn't what?" he asked.

"Nothing;" trying to be cross and dignified, but only succeeding in looking slightly ruffled, which was on the whole becoming. "Nothing at all;" and she turned away, and pretended to look out of the window.

"Well, tell me what you were going to say," and he tried to see her face; "what was it?"

"I shan't tell you," pressing her face against the window-pane.

"That's very rude," he answered reprovingly.

"What is?" she asked, hoping she had not smudged the tip of her nose against the glass, which was dusty, and trying to ascertain, by closing one eye and looking straight down it; "what is very rude, pray?"

"To say 'shan't,' good little girls never use such words."

"I wish you wouldn't talk in that way to me. I am not a good little girl, I am a young woman."

"Indeed."

"I am nearly twenty years old," turning quickly round and looking at him with a flushed face.

"Well, I cannot help that, can I?" he said, resting his hands on her shoulders, and looking at the downcast eyes and crimson cheeks. "How can you be so disagreeable, Polly?"

"I am sure I am not disagreeable," she answered helplessly.

"Yes, you are, very disagreeable. Don't you know how fond I am of you?" he added, suddenly.

"No, I don't," she said, chokingly; venturing to raise her eyes for a moment, but instantly hiding them beneath the heavy lids again.

"Yes, you do, you little witch," he said quietly and gravely; "you know I am very, very fond of you;" and he stooped and kissed her, while Polly murmured in surprise and confusion.

"Oh no, you cannot be, how can you?" and she felt the tears come into her eyes, and longed to cry from simple fulness of heart and happiness.

"I am," he said, in the same grave tone; but there

was a happy look on his face, and a laugh in his eyes Polly remembered always. "And it's very easy indeed to be fond of you;" and he waited a minute, but Polly had no words left. "Well, haven't you anything to say to me?" he asked at last, "or do you think I am too big, and ugly, and grim to be cared about?" Then the round tears rolled slowly down her cheeks.

"Oh, I don't—I don't," she cried; "if you could but know—" and all words failed her again.

"I think I do," he said gently; and he did, he knew perfectly.

The short journey was soon over, and Polly hardly knew whether she was dreaming, or waking, when she got out at Acton, and they went on in silence to find a way across some fields, if possible, to Ealing. They found some fields easily, and then as they went along the narrow footpath, still almost in silence, he pulled her arm through his, still half-amused, half-wondering, but feeling happier, and more boyish than he ever did in his life before, and when Polly, taking his arm, nestled up a little closer to him with the sense of a belonging, he felt his heart go out to her with a bound, and longed to take her in his arms and kiss her again.

She was almost too surprised and happy to speak; but at last she looked up and asked, "What was your idea—Richard?" the last word was out at last.

"They called me Dick at home," he said. "And I don't like being called Richard, because there was a greedy little boy called Richard in a spelling-book. He eat up all his cake, and gave no one any. I used to be made to read it when I was a little boy. I always think of it," he laughed.

"Dick is nicer than Richard, I think," she answered. "It is easier to say; it is not so grand. But what was the idea?"

"You know it now."

"No, I don't."

"I explained it in the train."

"Oh!" and she looked round at the green fields,

over which the summer was stealing, and wondéred, as she had wondered fifty times in the last half hour, if it could really be true, and if she were awake or dreaming, and almost unconsciously she gave his arm a little pinch.

“Why, what is that for?” he asked in astonishment, staring at her with his amused brown eyes.

“I wasn’t quite sure I was awake,” she answered meekly. “I wanted to be quite certain.”

“I thought you were trying to find out if I was stuffed with sawdust. I am quite real, I assure you.”

“I did not think you were not,” she cried in consternation; and then they both laughed, and went gaily on again, and after a few minutes, Polly took a good long look up at the face she had loved so long, and felt proud of it, and thought there was not any one like him in the whole world, and how wonderful it was that he should care for her. It could not surely go on all her life long, she thought, he could never be content with just her alone, she was not half, oh! not half good enough, or pretty enough, or anything in the world enough, to satisfy him always, and when this thought came to her it clouded her happiness for a moment, and then she looked up at him again, and said, with all her heart on her lips,

“Oh, dear Dick, I will never do anything in the world that can make you angry, if I know it. I’ll do my very, very best all my life long, I will indeed.”

“I know you will,” he said, hardly understanding her, “and so will I. But you must not think that I am an ogre, with whom you have always to be on your best behaviour.”

“I don’t, I don’t,” she cried, “only it does seem so wonderful that you—that you should——”

“That I should what?”

“That you should care for me. I can’t understand it.”

“I can. I understand it better than I understand anything else in the world,” and with that she was

satisfied, and went on in silence again. It was no use trying, they could not talk much that morning.

He left her just before she got to her aunt's, they had taken two hours, or nearly so, to do the two or three miles, but all things must end at last.

"I will write or come to-morrow," he said. "We don't mind what Miss Albury says, besides, I have only a few days more in town, so I shall come."

"Yes," she said simply; and then he looked at her again, and thought how pretty she was, and how pure and sweet, and unspoilt.

"Good-bye, dear Polly," he said, "you dear little girl—*my* little girl now;" and then he left her, and she stood watching him as he disappeared across the field, and she put up her hands to her face once more to make certain that she was awake, and strained her eyes till he was quite out of sight. "Oh, Dick, my darling, there is no one in the world like you," she said, as she turned and went on her way to her aunt's.

"I wonder if I ought to tell aunt Phillips," she thought as she walked up the garden pathway. "I forgot to ask Dick." She felt convinced he would have said "no" if she had asked him. She knew instinctively that he would, above all things, dislike playing the rôle of accepted lover, and somehow she did not much like the idea of Mrs. Phillips discussing the matter with her. Besides, it seemed a little more sacred and sweet while she alone knew the mighty fact, and she wanted to dream over it in silence for a little while longer, so she made up her mind to avoid mentioning Richard Brandford's name. It would not be difficult, she knew, for Mrs. Phillips was always too much taken up with her own affairs to show much interest in other people's, or to ask questions.

"Well, my dear, and what is your father doing?" That was a question Mrs. Phillips always remembered to ask, for her dislike of the lawyer increased yearly.

"Indeed I don't know, aunt."

"No, I dare say not, poor thing, he'll take good care you don't. I dare say he grudges you the bread you eat, and the shoes you wear."

"No, aunt, he's not as bad as that," Polly answered stoutly. "Please don't say anything against papa," she added pleadingly; "I know mamma would not like it."

"Ah, poor thing, she is at rest, and likes and dislikes are the same to her. By the way, Polly, I have some news for you. Annie is engaged." Annie was Mrs. Phillips's elder daughter.

"Oh!" said Polly, colouring up guiltily, for she suddenly realised that she too was engaged, though that was a light in which she had not looked at it until that moment, and she felt it was sly of her not to say so. "But I should not like to talk about it till he gave me leave," she said to herself. Mrs. Phillips thought the concise "oh" might be jealousy. She was one of those women who look upon marriage as the one aim and end of a girl's existence.

"A very good match indeed; an only son, with four or five hundred a-year of his own, and as much more when his mother dies."

"Oh!" said Polly again, with a slight feeling of disgust. "I am very glad;" and she made up her mind very certainly that she would say nothing about her own affair. It would be too dreadful to hear them speculating on what Dick might have a-year, and how much more he would have when his mother died. Whether he had five hundred or five thousand a year Polly did not know or care. She only did know that, if he swept a crossing, he would still seem to her the grandest person in the world.

"And so very suitable as to age. He is thirty-eight; a nice, sensible age; a man knows what he is about by that time."

"Thirty-eight?" said Polly; it seemed quite old, she thought. "Why, Annie is only twenty-five."

"Yes, my dear, that's what I say, such a nice sensible age."

"And is he nice, and clever, and kind and good?"

"Oh yes, of course he is," Mrs. Phillips answered, almost snappishly. "He's comfortably off, too; that's the chief thing. I dare say he'll make her a good husband. He's coming out to us at Christmas, and will be married abroad, which will save all the fuss of a wedding in England. You'll see him this evening; he will be here to dinner." And when he came, Polly saw a good-natured, rather mild individual, slightly bald, and with an unsuccessful moustache, who ate a good deal and said very little, and who seemed every now and then to remember, with a gasp, that he was engaged, and ought to make himself agreeable to his *fiancée*.

"Are you very happy?" she asked her cousin that evening.

"Oh yes, I suppose so. He is very well-off, you know," Annie answered, looking up from the long strip of fancy work in her hand.

"But Annie, wouldn't you have married him if he had been poor?"

"I don't know, I am sure. He would have been too prudent to have asked me."

"Are you great companions, do you care for the same things?"

"Yes, I suppose so. What a funny girl you are, asking all these questions," Annie Phillips laughed.

"But do you like talking about the same things when you are together?" Polly asked, desperately, for she was getting a view of life entirely new to her, and was determined to sift it to the end."

"We get on well enough," her cousin said. "When people are engaged, they don't want to talk all the time they are alone; and if we are not alone, we don't care about talking much; we play at draughts generally if it is dull. When we are married he'll find plenty to do, no doubt; he likes fishing, and I shall have the house to see after. People don't want to be great companions, as you call it, after they are married; besides, I should be so worried with a man always about me."

"But he'll want sympathy in his life, and understanding, and so will you."

"I expect he manages to do pretty well without, or he wouldn't have been single at thirty-eight. Marriage isn't as sentimental a business as you seem to think, Polly; and people don't go looking out for companionship, and sympathy, and all that—and don't want it. He's comfortably off, and he's good-natured, and we like each other, and he wants a home, and to feel settled down, and he thinks I shall do—and I shall. I shall look after the house, and keep things together, and we shall jog along all right, and both be better off married than we are single."

Polly thought about it for a long time that night. "It may be very sensible, she thought, but it would break my heart to marry in that way. It's very odd, but Annie and Mr. Powis seem only to care about the outside of the world. I am quite sure Dick will want sympathy and companionship, and so shall I." But she thought for a moment, that in spite of their long intimacy, his soul had not yet crept entirely out of the cupboard in which Miss Albury declared he kept it to gloat over, but it would, little by little. And then she thought over that day again, and went to sleep with a heart as light as a feather, grateful and happy, thinking longingly of the morrow on which she would see him again.

"Oh, my darling," she said, as a last thought; "I will try all my life long to keep your love, and to be better and better, and more worthy of it."

CHAPTER XI.

ADELAIDE GETS DESPERATE.



HENRY DAWSON was not a clever man, and he felt it more and more every day of his life, especially in the last ones of his partnership with Mr. Albury. He was cowardly too, and weak, and he knew it. He had had fortune in his sight, and within his reach, many a time, or fancied he had ; but he had failed, because, at the right moment, he had not had strength or courage enough to put out his hand and seize it. All this should be altered in the future, he thought ; and, as the first step towards it, he was determined to know more people, and people of a better kind, than he had yet had to do with, and by better he meant of higher social standing. To do it was the difficulty. He was not keen and quick as it was his desire to be, and he had distinctly nothing in himself to recommend him to society. This was what he thought, as he took his way to the Stanmore's on one of the long evenings of the spring that was so happy a one for Polly. The dinner, to which Grant Stanmore had invited him, had somehow been put off for a week or two, and as yet he had done nothing in the West Indian business ; he told Adelaide that it must wait until the dissolution of partnership was complete, and he had set up entirely on his own account. It should be his opening case he said, and with that, impatiently enough, she had had to be content.

The most remarkable thing in his acquaintance with the Stanmores was that as yet they had not tried to borrow any money of him. He was always in dread of their attempting to do so, for he felt that refusal would

mean termination of the acquaintance, and that he dreaded to a degree which astonished himself, although he could not help it.

Meanwhile matters were getting desperate with the Stanmores, and the attack on his purse-strings which the lawyer feared, was every day discussed. The dinner had passed off pretty well; they had done their best to hide the cloven foot of debt and poverty, and Grant Stanmore had tried to find conversation for his guest. He had told him of people, and places, and clubs, all of which had only been names to the pettifogging lawyer; and had cleverly insinuated, that it was only the want of a little ready money which kept him from still being in the swim of society. And Adelaide had, now and then, put in two or three forced, and rather scornful words, and had moved gracefully about in her silk and lace. But she had done more than that; she had looked at him with grave kind eyes and a worn sad look on her beautiful face that had sent him away feeling as in all his life he had never felt before, and thinking, as she always made him think, of his little son that died.

The landlady and the servant were hardly civil that night, it needed all the Stanmore talk to hide the state of things, and the next morning the former appeared with a summons from a milkman in one hand and a notice to quit from herself in the other.

"Here's a summons from the milkman, Miss Stanmore," she said, "and I'm not surprised. Folks must have their money, and here's a week's notice to quit. I can't go on for ever giving up my rooms to them as can't pay, waiting on them and their company, and getting nothing by it."

"Very well, Mrs. Brown, put them down and leave the room," Adelaide Stanmore answered gently.

"Yes, that's all very well, and there's nothing like riding the high horse; but I'm in want of my money, miss, and I want a part of it to-day. I've let you run on long enough, in all conscience."

"It is not convenient to pay part of it to-day. Please

go away ; " she said the words quite quietly and civilly. The woman hung about the doorway.

" You 'll understand, miss, I mean to have my money, and you 'll go out this day week ; and I mean to take the law to get the money if you don 't pay ; and you won 't take your things away until I 've got my rent."

" I quite understand. Be good enough to leave the room."

" No patience with beggars on horseback, " the woman muttered as she shut the door ; and Adelaide heard her plainly enough.

" Papa, " she said, as her father entered, " Here are more duns ; Mrs. Brown has given us notice ; here is another summons, and we have not a pound in the world. I cannot think why you delay asking the lawyer. It is no good his coming here unless we are to make use of him."

Grant Stanmore sat down, his teeth almost chattered with fear ; he knew, as well as his daughter did, that they had indeed come to the end of their resources.

" It will be no good asking Dawson, he won 't lend it, and he will refuse to take up the lawsuit ; " in his heart, and knowing what he did, Grant Stanmore never expected the lawsuit to be taken up ; but it had been a solace to him for years to talk about it, besides it had been useful in soothing Adelaide.

" And the picture-dealer has finally refused your picture ? "

" Yes ; he says times are bad for picture-dealing. It was very unfriendly of Barker not to buy it. I offered it to him for twenty pounds, purely out of friendship."

" You offered it for five to the picture-dealer, for whom you had no friendship. I don 't see that you can complain."

" But Barker is an old friend, my dear ; and I told him three months ago I would not take fifty for it."

" Well, it is waste of time discussing this. What are we to do ? We have not one pound, and unless we get a hundred in the course of the week there will be

only starvation and the streets for us. I suppose it is of no use trying Mr. Albury again?"

"None."

"Then you must go to Mr. Dawson."

"It will be useless."

"Then we must simply go to the workhouse."

"My dear Adelaide"—but his teeth chattered again—"you really should not be so violent."

"But what is to be done? I am not violent, but our emergency is."

"Do you think Lady Mason would be of any help?"

"None; she might lend us ten pounds, and be very insolent about it; and ten pounds would be a drop in the sea."

"I wonder if Alfred's boy is really delicate?"

"What is the good of wondering that now?" she said. "It is quite certain he will do nothing for us. There is nothing before us but starvation at last."

"We have nothing to sell?"

"Nothing. You know that as well as I do; the last trinket I possessed was sold to get rid of the last two summonses. You must try Mr. Dawson. I think with you it will be useless, but there is no other chance in the world; and there is only beggary before us."

"I know he'll refuse. I never disliked the idea of asking anyone so much in all my life."

"There's nothing else to be done."

"But when he has refused, as he certainly will, what then?"

She stopped and considered. She knew as well as her father did that he would refuse, and yet she had not dared to think what they would do afterwards. She sat for a moment looking hopelessly at her father, and then in a low miserable voice that was almost like a cry of pain, she answered simply—

"I don't know." She looked out at the sunshine and up at the blue sky before the windows, and thought absently of the tide coming in at Treston-on-the-Sea, and the cottage there, and of the grand house they used to

live in long ago in London, and then her thoughts came back again to their present misery. "I don't know. I cannot think," she said.

"You must think it over; we must both think it over. I will go down to the club; I may get some luncheon there."

"Very well," she said; thinking that it did not occur to him that she had none at home.

"I must get some colours, and see what can be done. I am quite out of colours."

"What is the good of getting colours, we owe a long bill now for them? Why do you go multiplying the stones round our neck?"

"My dear Adelaide, you are so unreasonable. You know the bill for them will not come in till Christmas, more than six months hence; what is the use of making a fuss about my buying colours now?" And he went out and left her alone in the cheerless room, the summons and the notice to quit both on the mantelshelf staring her in the face. Presently, as if in mockery—she knew it was done so—the servant appeared, and asked what she was going to have for luncheon.

"Nothing," she said sharply, "I have a headache," and she was left alone again. She sat alone all through the morning, hardly knowing how the long hours passed away, until it was late in the afternoon. Then suddenly she pulled out her purse and looked at its contents—four shillings, and she had not another penny in the world, and her father, she knew, had hardly as much as four shillings in the world, and where the next shillings were to come from she did not know.

"It is horrible," she said at last, after a long, long consideration, "but I will do it. I will go and ask the lawyer myself. If he refuses we shall at any rate know the worst." She dressed herself with care, and in ten minutes she was on her way.

CHAPTER XII.

AT THE LAWYER'S OFFICE.



HE walked a long way, and then took a cab, an omnibus was an indignity to which her pride had never yet submitted. She got out at the corner of Old Jewry, and as she did so the clock struck five. She almost feared the lawyer would be gone, and she quickened her pace, and went tremblingly on till she came to a house with the name of the firm on the door. Her courage failed her a little then, and she hesitated for a moment—only for a moment—then she entered and found herself in an office in which two clerks were sitting at their respective desks.

“Is——” She could not get the words out.

“Mr. Dawson is here,” one of the young men said; “Mr. Albury has gone.”

“I wish to see Mr. Dawson.”

“Will you go to him. He is in his room, through that door, and turn to the right.” She hesitated a minute again, and then pushing the swinging door, passed through, and found another door facing her, at which she knocked. She felt herself tremble. She had attempted disagreeable things before, and had accomplished them. She did not know why she was so great a coward now.

“Come in,” the lawyer’s voice said; and she entered. She looked hurriedly round; she saw it was a good-sized room, with two doors, one by which she had entered, and one leading into the clerk’s office. There were shelves partially round it, and on them were square tin boxes, on which names were painted in white letters. They made her think of coffins. There were two tables,

one at the far end of the room, and one to the left as she entered. At the far end one there was a vacant chair. Above the one on the left there was a gas-light burning (for it was a dark room) with a green shade, and at the table, surrounded by books and papers, Henry Dawson was sitting. She entered trembling, she faltered on the threshold, she looked round quickly and fearfully; she saw Henry Dawson, and all her self-possession and her pride came back in a moment.

"Miss Stanmore!" and he rose to his feet.

"Yes," she said, as she took the chair he offered her by the side of the table; "I have come to see you on business, Mr. Dawson." He knew instinctively what the business was, and prepared himself as best he could for the tug of war. He merely bowed his head in answer, feeling like a gambler playing for a desperate stake, and knowing beforehand that, no matter how the game went, he would somehow be a loser. "You said once," she went on in a cold voice that had a strange ring of sadness in it, "you said once you would do anything for me. Do you remember?"

"Yes," he answered simply.

"Well—" She hesitated a little, and her face flushed, and he looking up for a moment, thought wonderingly how beautiful she must have been only a few years ago. It was the only beauty in woman, or for the matter of that in aught else, of which he had ever been keenly sensible. "You know our history pretty well, you have heard it often enough lately, and you know we cannot run away, but we are terribly in debt; there is a summons in the house now, and in a week we shall be turned into the street, unless we pay up the long arrears of rent; it is no use disguising how bad it is, and we cannot raise any more money. We are almost desperate, and so I have come to you. You said we should gain our case; will you advance us some money, Mr. Dawson?"

She did not ask him supplicatingly, but almost defiantly, for the humiliation had brought her to bay.

"My dear young lady," he began in his softest tones, "you do not understand me, you mistake me altogether. I am a poor man, a very poor man——"

"No," she said; and she rose as if to go, "you are not poor, that I know positively. You may not choose to lend it, that is another matter;" and she pushed aside her chair. He was not a man to be argued with, she felt; but to be cowed into doing what she wished. He put out his hand for an instant like one groping in the dark, and then drew it quickly back.

"Stay," he said, "my dear Miss Stanmore, let me discuss this matter with you." The words were words he might have used to anyone, but the tone was one his voice had taken only once or twice before. "Tell me how much it is you want?"

"We must have a hundred pounds, and that would only be the merest stop-gap. I do not see how we can do without two hundred pounds, and that at once."

"And the security?"

"We have no security beyond the fact that we cannot run away."

"And you have no friends, no means of getting this money, no one to be security for you."

"We have no friends who will give us a single penny-piece," she said, looking him unflinchingly in the face; "and no one who will be security for us."

"You have no means at all of getting it?" Their friends must be cleverer and sharper people than he had supposed fashionable people to be, or else they really had no friends, in which case their consequence in his eyes would go down considerably. *

"We have no friends, for we have no money; no doubt we should have any number the day after we won the lawsuit," she added.

"People keep away from you because you are poor, only because you are poor?" he said softly; but in his own mind he was evidently considering some matter keenly.

"Yes, that is it."

"And you must have the money, you cannot go on without it, you have no means at all?" he asked.

"None, or I should not have asked you."

"I am a poor man——" he began again. She turned to the door. She was evidently weary and disgusted. "Sit down," he said, and again, mechanically, she did so. "Miss Stanmore," he said, huskily and meekly, his hands folded, and his words coming with difficulty from between his teeth, "I cannot lend you this money, I am indeed a poor man; but" as she made a gesture of impatience, "I will get it for you at any cost, at any cost, if you will give me a right to give it——"

"A right?" she said, wonderingly.

"Yes, a right. You cannot misunderstand me—if you will marry me."

"Marry you!" and she looked at him with undisguised scorn. "Do you know what you are saying?" she asked; staring in her thoughts with consternation at her poverty and the terrible alternative before her.

"Yes," he said humbly, "I know what we are saying, and I know you are poor and proud, and friendless because you are poor, and I can give you some comforts. I would devote my life to you——"

"You said you were poor, and I care for money more than for anything else in the world—it is all I do care for now—ease, and luxury, and money." She had not softened in manner; but her words told of the awful struggle going on within her; her head was turned away, and her voice as scornful as before.

"I am not very poor," he pleaded; owning it at last for a woman's sake. "And I could give you some comforts."

"We were so proud of our family, too," she said.

It was a weak, foolish remark; it had only to do with her thoughts, and nothing with their conversation. She sat quite still, with her hands clasped, looking down on them. She knew all the poverty at home, the virago

landlady, the summons and the notice to go, the thoughtless father, and the empty purse in her pocket.

"I want more than comfort," she said, desperately; "I want luxury, a carriage, and horses, and my father to live with me, and"—the tears came up to her eyes—sad eyes that could still look soft, and had once, perhaps, looked sweet. She forced back the tears, but she thought quickly what a disappointment life had been; of all the hopes and chances she had thrown away, of the love laid at her feet once by men in whose society this man, whom she might possibly marry, was not worthy to stand. She thought, too, for just one moment, of Treston-by-the-Sea, and of a tall figure standing idly on the beach, and then once more she tried to save herself from the life with which fate threatened her—"and," she went on, "I should have no affection for you, not even liking. It would be marrying you for your money only—and ease, and luxury—would that content you?"

"I am not so very rich," he answered; drawing in a little, though his nature would not let him retort as he should have done. "I have a house at Kensington, but I am not rich; I cannot give you a carriage, and very many luxuries, but I would devote my life to you—I would give you some comforts; you should have all I have—all I have."

"Then it is of no use," she said, rising. "I should only marry you, because you could give me what I prize most, and if you cannot give it to me—well, it is of no use talking;" and once more she rose, and this time she reached the door.

"Oh, come back," he cried; stretching out his hands and forgetting everything, as he gazed at her, except that, even as Jack died, so would she pass from his sight, unless he gave her that which he had denied to him. "I have plenty of money, and you shall have everything I possess in the world, everything I have to give, if you will only relent;" and his tone was soft and cringing again. She faltered, and raised her eyes slowly to his face, and shrank from him.

"Oh no," she said; "I cannot—oh no, no, I cannot;" and she put her hands up over her eyes as if to shut him out from her sight. "I will go home," she said, suddenly; "I will go home and think the matter over, and in the morning you shall hear from me."

"And you will——"

"I will tell you all then—now let me go." She opened the door, and passed out quickly up the Old Jewry.

The lawyer went back to his papers, and putting his head down on the table, attempted no more work that night.

He went home soon. The dingy house was silent and deserted, for Polly was dreaming her happy time away at Ealing. It was odd, that the same day should have been so important for both father and daughter. Henry Dawson looked down the silent hall, and up the dim staircase; then he entered the dining-room—the room in which his son had died. The arrangement of the furniture had been altered, and the sofa removed, but he could always see it all in his mind's eye—the boy with the hectic spots upon his cheeks, and the bright light in his eyes, and Polly seated at the piano.

He turned up the gas and looked round, and thought, nervously, that she would never be content with it. There was something satisfactory to him in thinking that she would not; there was something almost akin to unconscious satisfaction in his mind in the reflection that—supposing she accepted him—his nature, that had domineered over all his belongings through life, had found its master at last, and would be domineered over in its turn. But of this he was unaware, he only thought that he was anxious to please her, and he was right—he was. He had found another reason, too, for any future actions, that while not commendable in themselves, might yet be worth consideration from a worldly point of view. Another source of satisfaction to him was that he felt that Adelaide Stanmore would probably not only be no stickler for absolute observance of all laws, written and unwritten, but that she would be no frightened half-

hearted doer of anything to which she gave her mind, and which might be to her worldly advantage, and he wanted to launch out, and had not courage to do it alone.

He went into the study. A note from Polly was lying on the table.

"MY DEAR PAPA,—I am going to Aunt Phillips. I have put everything ready for you, and there are two nice new-laid eggs from Mary's mother for your breakfast. Mary's mother sent this morning to say she was very, very poor, and would be so grateful if you would raise Mary's wages. We have had her a long time, and her wages are very small, dear papa; and she is a good girl, so please do. I would not trouble you about it in a letter, only Mary wants to know by to-morrow morning if possible, so that she may promise some help towards sending her little brother to school. I hope you will not come home very tired, dear papa.

"Your affectionate daughter,
"Polly."

He hardly read the simple letter, but threw it down impatiently, and forgot all about it. He sat at his writing-table in his study, not as he had at his writing-table in the office, with his face buried in his hands, but upright, and staring vacantly before him. He wondered how he should wait till the morning came—the morning which would shape the future for him. He tried to consider what he would do if he was accepted; and, as he calmly reviewed the Stanmores' position, he felt the chances were that he would be accepted. The partnership with Albury was in its last days, that was certain. But the future he was doubtful about. He sometimes thought he should take boldly to speculation; for that only required extreme acuteness, which he thought he had, and not extreme cleverness, which he felt he had not. He had already money enough to enable him to alter his manner of living very considerably, and to start any business in which he would presently care to venture it. If by one or two clever strokes he could double it, he felt he could forgive himself for the wild dream in which he was indulging. Afterwards if he started with the prestige of a well-appointed house, and a beautiful wife, and the friends his money would

enable that wife to know again and bring to the house, and so within his reach, he might carry all before him.

He got up and walked up and down ; he took Polly's letter, and screwing it into a ball, threw it into the fireplace, and sat down again. He tried to write some letters ; he almost started as he recognised an old envelope on his table, directed in Robert Welch's hand. He took it up, and after idly reading it, a sudden thought seemed to strike him, and he wrote a note, saying that he was not exactly on good terms with his brother, and did not know his whereabouts, but that he knew there would be something for Robert some day. Then he gave himself up to feverish waiting for the morning.

It came at last ; a happy, sunny morning. It brought two letters for Polly ; one with the Benthwaite postmark, and addressed in her aunt Marie's hand ; and one, a thin letter, addressed in a hand the lawyer did not know. It was a man's hand, and peculiar ; a thought vaguely crossed his mind that perhaps Polly had a sweetheart, but he troubled himself no more about it, and prepared to start for the office and find the letter which, he was certain, awaited him there. As he was leaving the house Mary, the servant-of-all-work, appeared.

"Well?" he asked, impatiently.

"Please sir, there's the rise in my wages," she said, humbly.

"The what?"

"Miss Polly said she'd write about the rise in my wages. My little brother's delicate, sir, and wants sending to school, else he'll have to work hard for his living, and may-be won't thrive, sir, at all."

"What have I to do with your brother going to school?"

"Please sir, it can't be done unless I help mother, and that's why I want my wages rose. My brother isn't fit for work, so we want to educate him, sir, and

then he'd be independent; and he's very thin, sir, like Master Jack."

"Very well," he said, "Very well, what is it you want?"

"It's two pounds a year more only, sir; you wouldn't feel it much, sir, and mother's—"

"Well, I'll see about it," he said crossly. "There—I don't want to prevent your brother going to school, I'll see, I'll see. Make all the house very clean, Mary, and very nice, and I'll see." And he left the house, leaving Mary sorely puzzled to know whether her request was refused or granted.

He got to the office at last. He entered breathlessly, his heart standing still, and taking up his pile of letters, turned them nervously over. There were two marked *private*, one in a man's hand, and one in a woman's. He opened the latter first, it contained these words:—

"I accept your proposal.—A. S."

That was all; he gasped, and a feeling of dizziness, almost of faintness, came over him for a moment. He took it up and looked at it again, the words were nervously written, but they were plain enough. Holding the letter sideways by chance he saw a round dull spot that did not show when it was held straight. It looked as if a tear had fallen upon it. Oddly enough, the lawyer, untouched by so much, was touched by that round spot on the small sheet of paper in his hand. Something like a longing crept into his heart to make life better for her, to see the worn look vanish from the faded face, and the light steal into the beautiful eyes again. "I will do anything for her," he said to himself, "anything in the world." And he took up the letter again, and looked long and almost tenderly at the place where that bitter tear had fallen. He knew all she must have suffered, when she wrote that letter. Yet he was not offended nor angry; he did not take it as a personal matter, that the marriage to which she had consented was hateful, and undertaken only as a last chance of social

life, or of life at all ; but he knew perfectly it was so for all that, and he looked again and again at the spot. It softened him more than any words could have done.

Presently he took up the second letter. It was from Grant Stanmore.

"MY DEAR SIR,—My daughter tells me you have kindly promised to advance us a couple of hundred pounds, and as I shall be near Old Jewry to-morrow at one o'clock, I will do myself the great pleasure to call upon you.

"Yours most truly,
"GRANT STANMORE."

Grant Stanmore had not been able to bring himself to mention the marriage. He knew he would have to be gracious, but he determined to begin with the lawyer as he meant to go on, and to secure the two hundred before matters went further.

CHAPTER XIII.

“WE ARE TOO OLD FOR LOVE-MAKING.”



DELAIDE STANMORE was sitting alone in the sitting-room at Pimlico. The cloth was laid for dinner, the landlady humble, penitent, and attentive, brought in some flowers to brighten up the table, and asked in a deferential voice—vastly different from yesterday's scornful tone, if the table was as Miss Stanmore liked.

“Oh, it will do,” Adelaide said. “Please go when you have finished;” and the landlady left the room muttering to herself that “whether they were up or down in the world, they'd be that proud to the end of their days, there would be no bearing with them.”

She sat watching by the window, hoping her father would come in before the lawyer, whom her father had asked to dine with them. She dreaded a *tête-à-tête*. Grant Stanmore had been to the City in the morning, and had brought away one instead of two hundred pounds, but still the summons was disposed of, the landlady appeased, and food was in the house, and Grant Stanmore was not afraid to enter his club, and dared to give a few more orders at various shops, and matters were altogether better.

“Papa ought to come home,” she said bitterly to herself. “He knows how I hate him,” alluding to her future husband; and then she fell to wondering what the lawyer's daughter was like, and only hoped above all things she was not a hoyden, nor loud and vulgar. “Of course she'll resent my marrying her father,” she thought, “but that won't matter. Probably she can be sent away to visit relations, or, if she is quiet, it may be

better to keep her at home, anything will be better than the father."

She saw the lawyer come down the street and towards the house, and heard him ring and knock. She rose in dismay, thinking she would beat a retreat, and so gain a few minutes' respite, but she changed her mind and stood her ground unflinchingly.

He entered the room nervously enough, uncertain of his welcome, but her manner was precisely what it had been on all his previous visits. It was not a shade warmer, it was distinctly as formal.

"How do you do, Mr. Dawson," she said; "I am sorry my father is not home yet, he will be here directly, no doubt. He must be detained at the club."

"I am very glad, it will be so delightful to get a few minutes together," he said, as he took a chair. She made no answer, but sat with her hands folded one over the other. And he stopped nervously, for she was only looking away from him, he hardly knew if she had heard what he said.

"My father only went to the club for an hour," she said; speaking aloud her thoughts. "I wish he would return."

"He came to me to-day."

"I know. You only sent one hundred pounds; I told you, that would only be a stop-gap," she answered, almost bitterly.

"I thought there was no occasion to send more. All I have will be yours soon," he said, humbly.

There was no answer; and still she only sat looking away from him. After a few minutes he, looking up quickly, saw the tears stealing slowly down her face. He thought of the round spot on the letter; for one moment all his heart rose within him and went out to her. He went over to her—

"Adelaide," he said, and she resented by a look his calling her by her first name, "what is the matter? I will do anything for you. You shall have all I possess in the world. Oh, if you could but know what I think of

you"—but she only put up her hands over her face and sobbed, and said no word. "Oh, my dear, I will give you all I have, and go away from you, if you like. I will do anything for you. I know I am not like you; but I will devote all I have, all I am, to you."

"There, there," she said, "It is nothing. I am tired and excited. You must not mind me, Mr. Dawson. I am not well. You are very kind, and I will do what I can to make you happy."

He stooped and kissed her hands, and looked up longingly at her face to see some sign of softness on it. But she only drew her hands gently away.

"We are too old for love-making," she said.

"Oh, no," he cried passionately; "not when I worship you so; when I would do anything in the world for you. You will learn to like me in time, it is a thing that doesn't come all at once. I will wait for it—you are so beautiful. I am not worthy of you," he said, in his old voice, the voice she hated most. "If you only knew how beautiful you are."

"Tell me about your daughter." He went back to his chair, but drew it up nearer to hers.

"She is a good girl," he said. He did not want to talk about Polly.

"Is she pretty?"

"I don't know. She is a slight strip of a girl. She is not like you; she is very different from you;" and he stretched out his hand, but she drew back.

"How old is she?"

"Twenty," he answered. "When will you marry me, Adelaide?" he asked. "You will let it be soon, will you not. There is no use in waiting; there is nothing to wait for."

"No; there is nothing to wait for," she echoed bitterly enough. She knew it would be useless putting it off; and it occurred to her that she might manage Henry Dawson better, as her husband, than as her lover. "Tell me where your house is?"

"It is in Kensington, in —— Road."

"I suppose if I don't like it you will take another?"

"Not yet," he answered. "I have a lease: it is a nice house. You shall have some new things to put about. You shall not be ashamed to ask your friends to come."

"Friends!" she said scornfully. "I told you yesterday I had none."

"You said, it was only because you were poor, that they would come about you again, if you were rich."

"No doubt; but they never shall."

"Why not?" he said anxiously. "It is always unwise to cut one's friends."

"You are more forgiving than I," she said. "Do you mean you could forgive people who cut you when you were poor, and came about you again when you were well off?"

"It is always pleasanter to know rich people than poor; you can't blame them. Besides, they may be useful."

"Useful?"

"Yes, to me, in my profession. Remember, your husband will be a professional man. You must work with him." She turned round and looked at him.

"Is this why you want to marry me?" she asked; "because I may be useful to you?"

"No, no; no, it is because I want you; because I love you."

"I hoped it was for the other reason, then we should have been on an equal footing," she said gently; "but I will try to pick up all the worldly acquaintance I can since you desire it. Now tell me about your house."

"Tell me when you will come to see it; when you will marry me?" And he went forward almost like a lover towards her.

"When you please," she said helplessly; "a little time more or less does not matter."

"And you will like me in time; you will care for me. I will study you all my life; and give you all I

can ;" and he was on his knees beside her kissing her hands.

She drew them away shrinkingly and rose, so he perforce went back to his seat. She stood leaning against the mantelpiece, and the tears came down her face once more ; but she brushed them away so quickly that he did not see them.

" You must not worry me," she said, in the softest voice in which she had yet spoken to him. " I am not going to marry you for love, and you know it. Luckily, we are past the age at which love-making seems necessary to one's salvation in this world. We are both sensible, worldly-wise people. I will do the best I can for you. I will take care of your house, and of your name. You shall have nothing to complain of to the world. All people cannot be married at heart. We are too old not to be sensible, or to see how things are. Let us make the best of it." He stood and looked at her.

" You will care for me in time—in time." He had a weak, undecided way of repeating his last words.

" Love is not all," she answered ; and her heart ached as she said it. " Come, let us make the best of what there is for us," and she laughed ; a miserable laugh enough, but he had never heard her laugh at all before, he thought. Puzzled, beaten, and disappointed, he sat down.

" When am I to see your daughter ?" she asked, suddenly.

He started ; it had not occurred to him that she would wish to see Polly. Suddenly it was brought home to him that Polly would have to be made acquainted with the change that was about to be made in his life, and the idea was not a pleasant one.

" She does not know, yet."

" You must tell her. Let her know at once," she answered gently ; but there was a slight tone of authority in her voice, which the lawyer rebelled against at heart, and yet submitted to completely. " Will you bring her

to call upon me ; or shall I go to her ?" But before he could answer Grant Stanmore entered.

" How do you do, Dawson ! " he said ; but the lawyer felt, in spite of his friendly words, there was something patronising in his voice. It was his own fault. There was something in Henry Dawson's manner that provoked patronage. " You and Adelaide have been having a talk together, I see."

Then the business of dinner interrupted further conversation.

" And now, my dear Dawson," said Grant Stanmore, when they were lingering over their dessert, " tell me when you will open the West Indian case."

" It shall be the first case after we are together, the very first ; " and he looked at Adelaide.

" What is your daughter's name, Mr. Dawson ? " Adelaide asked, when they were alone again for a moment.

" Polly."

" I shall call her Mary," she answered. " I dislike the name of Polly."

" You shall call her anything you like," he said ; " and, and—won't you call me Henry ? "

She looked at him. After all she thought she owed him a great deal. But for him she and her father would have been homeless in another week ; he had saved them ; he was ready to give her everything in the world, he said. It was not his fault that life had been so utter a disappointment to her. It was not his fault, perhaps, that something in himself made her feel it was impossible to have any sentiment, or even liking, towards him. But he had been good to her in a sense ; he was the one way of living before her. She hated herself more than she did him, she thought ; and she hated him for making her feel herself so base and wicked ; for she felt keenly how mean a part she was playing. But at least she would never deceive him. He was giving her that which better men had refused her, surely she owed him something. Perhaps the best in her was rising in her heart

as she stood there. Then, too, it was something to have the load of poverty off her mind; to think there would be no more insolence from landladies, and summonses from tradespeople, but some one to work for her, and take care of her, and let her be master with it all, as she felt she would be with him. Oh! it was indeed something. And she was grateful, and made a resolution that she would be staunch and true to him outwardly, no matter what her rebellious heart might be. She looked back at him with a smile, forced enough, and yet it had a strange brightness in it; it seemed as if it had travelled back from her youth, and beautified her face with its light.

“I will call you Henry,” she said. “You must try and get famous, then I shall be proud of you, who knows but we may win a dozen great cases together?” and as she said the words, that then rose, it hardly seemed from her own soul to her lips, but from something prophetic within, a new life seemed to glimmer in the distance, and in the fascination of wealth, she thought they might yet have some sympathy in common, some link between them.

And the lawyer went away bewildered, and charmed by her words, thinking that all the world was yet before him, and all the past would grow dim, and cease to trouble him.

Just at present he did not like the prospect of telling Polly that a stepmother was in store for her. But perhaps she would marry too, soon, he thought; there was young Welch, and there might be some one else, girls were very quiet about these matters sometimes, and there was that letter that morning in a strange hand, it might mean something. Then if Polly married, or if she went to Benthwaite to live, which was not impossible, he and Adelaide would have the house to themselves, and there would be no one to see the foolish worship to which he longed to give himself up.

Polly had come home from Ealing, that was evident, for his slippers were put ready, and a bunch of fresh

flowers was on the middle of the table. He almost wished she had sat up for him that night, as he had sometimes scolded her for doing ; but she was evidently in bed, and in the easy chair, crumpled up, there was a little white pocket handkerchief. It looked almost as if Polly had been crying, and the handkerchief soaked with tears had remained behind as evidence ; but that was all nonsense, she had nothing to cry for, he thought. Perhaps Polly would like Adelaide, and Polly would have a good influence on Adelaide, and make her understand what had always been the ways of the house, and content with them.

And so thinking, he went off to bed, his heart in a whirl, and with never a single regret going back to her who had been a faithful wife to him all through his struggling years, the mother of his children, who would have loved him, had he let her, more than Adelaide Stanmore ever would, though she lived a thousand years.

CHAPTER XIV.

POLLY'S LETTER TO RICHARD BRANDFORD.

ERHAPS he will come to meet me," said Polly to herself as she awoke that happy morning at Ealing, and looked round the strange room to be quite certain that she was awake. Then she remembered he could not do so, for he did not know the time of her going home. But he had said he would come and see her on the morrow, so she would make haste back, she thought. Yet she was in no hurry to see him, meeting, she knew, was a certain and sure thing, and the sweetness of thinking over yesterday, made, for a little while, solitude almost as welcome as his presence. She could think of him now more calmly too, than when her eyes and ears were busy looking up at his face, and taking in the music of his voice. She thought over all the time they had spent together, and all he had said to her, how often he had told her of books she must read, and things she ought to know, and always in a way that made the telling even of an unwelcome truth sweet, and increased her love for him. "I will learn all I can," she thought, "and try to read and think for myself," for she remembered once, when she had lamented to him how little she knew, he had laughed and teased her, and when her face was getting grave, and he thought he might have pained, he had said, "Never mind, Polly, if you have not read all the books that ever were written, no more have I, thank goodness; and if you cannot speak all the languages that ever were invented, it is a good thing, for there would

never be a chance of your little tongue being quiet in any land, if you could. You can think for yourself, and that is better than a liberal education, and makes you pleasant to talk to." She would always remember that, and try and be a companion to him she thought, and as long as she lived she would never, never do, or say, or even think, if she knew it, anything that could make him angry. To see Dick really angry, that would indeed be terrible, she thought, but he never should be. She would love him so dearly too, she could not help doing that; and now she might let herself go, and there was no harm in her caring for him, oh! it seemed to take away her breath when she even thought of it. And so she went on thinking, as she made herself ready for breakfast, looking out now and then in the direction of the fields, where she and he had walked yesterday. She took up the cloak she had worn, to brush the dust from it. There was a little bead tassel about the shoulder. She remembered he had played with it absently in the train, twisting it round and round with his fingers while he talked to her, and she kissed it passionately, and vowed again to love him dearly all her life. And she could not see why she should not take this sweetness in her life to that Father to whom she had taken all her sorrows, and so with all her heart she thanked Him for the great happiness that had come to her, and prayed simply that she might make the man she loved happy, and keep his love always, and learn to be all that he would best like to see her. And then she looked out towards the fields again.

"I wonder if papa has raised Mary's wages," she thought, as she went down-stairs; and then she wondered what the lawyer would say when he heard about Dick, and if Dick would tell him, or how it would be managed. "But he will do what is best," she thought; "he'll manage everything in the wide world for me now, but oh! I can't believe it yet, he can't go on caring for *me*," and so she went over the old ground again. She left Ealing by an early train, and as she went up to town she wondered how

she would meet him that afternoon; for she was certain he would come, and what he would say to her, and she wondered shyly, and was ashamed to wonder whether he would kiss her. She would try and look very nice, she thought, and perhaps they would get one of the old long talks together in the dining-room at home without any fear of Mrs. Grundy or Margaret Albury before their eyes. Perhaps he would let her tell Margaret, for, in spite of Margaret's plain speaking, she liked her. She thought sometimes Margaret was like a currant tart with not enough sugar, for just a little sweetness would make her very nice indeed. She had a kind heart but a sharp tongue. She used to wish once that Margaret had been softer, so as to have been more of a friend and companion to her, but it didn't matter now. She did not want anyone but Dick, just Dick, and no one else in this world. And so she got to the station. He was not there, she did not expect it, she was almost glad, she could walk quietly home thinking of him, and when he came in the afternoon, she would be quite ready for him.

There were two letters for her. She saw them lying on the table the moment she entered the dining-room; she took them up, but tried to hear what Mary lingered to say, while she crumpled them in her hand without opening them.

“Did papa say he wouldn't raise them, then?”

“No Miss, he said I was to put all the house nice, and he didn't want to keep my brother from school.”

“Then he must mean to raise them. How odd for papa to speak about the house being nice. There, Mary, go down stairs, there's a good girl.” And she sat down to read her letters. She had seen with a little thrill of disappointment, that one was addressed in Dick's hand, and feared it might be to say he could not come, but while she spoke to Mary it crossed her mind that it might be to make some appointment, or tell her the time of his coming, and so she sat down with her happiness full upon her, to read it. It was very short, she saw that at a glance, and her heart sank a little, she did not know

why. It was the first and last love-letter she ever had from him, and it ran thus :

“ MY DEAR POLLY,—Have just had a telegram, and am obliged to start for the North at once. Will write from there.

“ Yours affectionately,
“ RICHARD BRANDFORD.”

“ Oh,” she said disappointedly ; “ it is not a very sentimental letter. Robert Welch used to say ‘ dearest Polly,’ which was much nicer ; ” and she proceeded to read it again. “ ‘ Yours affectionately ; ’ it was ‘ yours ever ’ last time. But he would not put even that if he did not mean it, for it is not as if I were his sister or his cousin, or even a girl he had known for a very long time.” Then she remembered that the last letter had only been signed with just one initial, which somehow had seemed to say so much more than his whole name. Well, it was all right, she supposed, with a long sigh, but she was bitterly disappointed. She had so longed to see him again, and now perhaps he would stay at Benthwaite for a long time, for he had been going soon in any case. Then she remembered that she could not get a letter in the morning, for even if he wrote directly he got there, he would not be in time to save the evening’s post to the south. It was no use, she must bear it, of course ; and he would think of her, she knew, and write to his little girl as he had called her, as soon as he could, and with that she must be content.

Then she took up the other letter. It was from her Aunt Maria, at Benthwaite, she knew, and suddenly it flashed through her mind like sunshine, that her aunt had so often invited her to Benthwaite, and if it could be managed that her visit should be paid while Dick was there, it would indeed be delightful. She tore open the letter with an excitement of which a moment before she had seemed incapable.

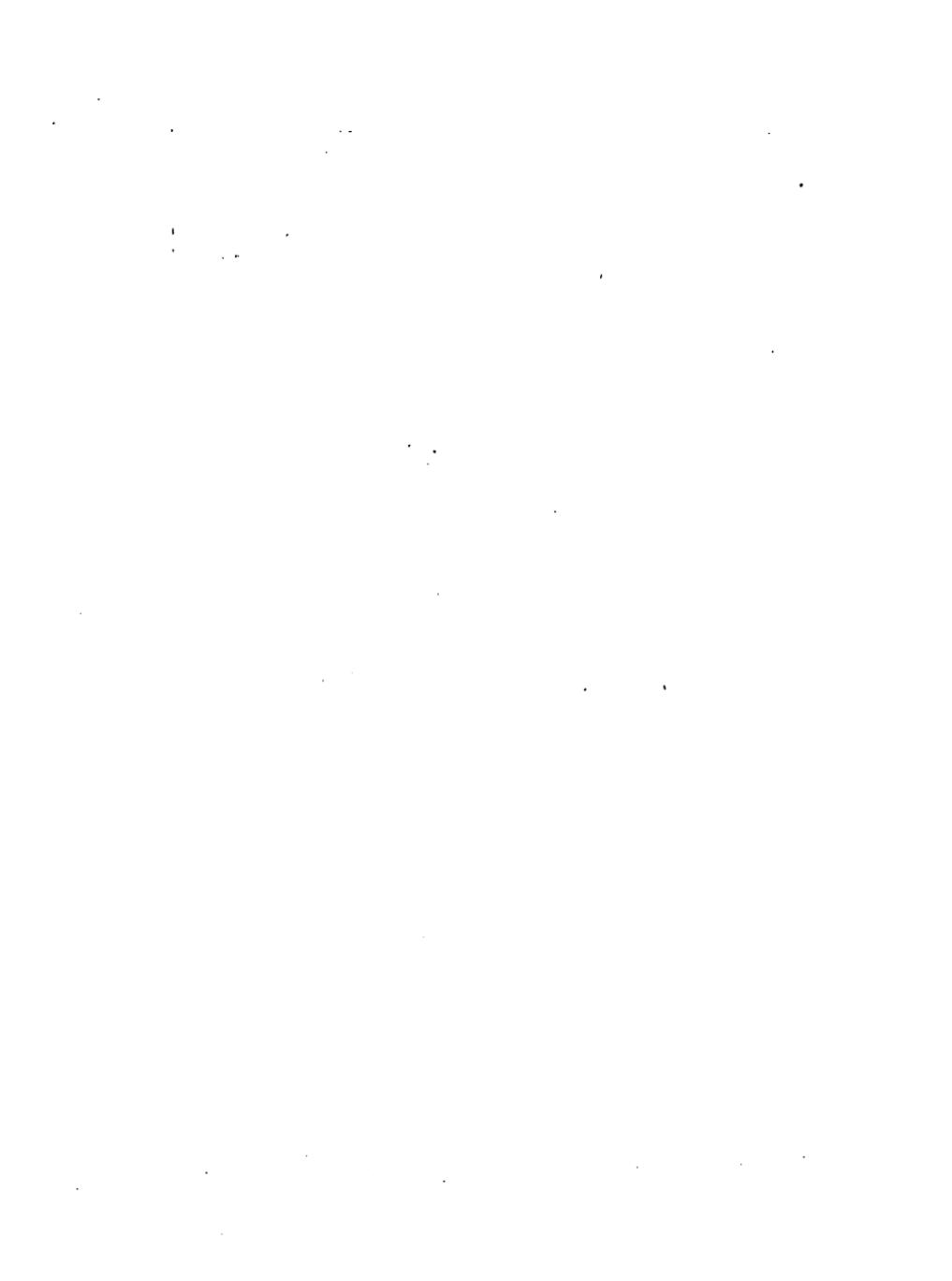
Her aunt began with a regret that her niece had not come to visit her yet, and said she had made up her mind to have her down in two or three months’ time, and

would herself write to her father about it, and, if necessary, pay the expense of her journey, and then she continued—

“I have sent you a little present, my dear, which Miss Clayton, who went to town yesterday, has kindly taken charge of, and said she should call upon you herself and bring. I hope she will like you; you will often see her when you come to stay with me, for next month she is going to be married to Mr. Richard Brandford of this place.”

Polly did not start or scream, but she looked round for a moment to be sure that she was awake, and stared out of the window, and shaded her eyes from the sunshine, and wondered absently what the present was. Then she read the letter again. "It must be some mistake," she said. She did not cry or sob, she had no sense of anger, nor of passionate rebellion, but she sat down, stupefied and dazed, and a sickening sense of pain went to her heart. "It can't be true; it can't, can't be true," she said; and read the letter again. There was no mistake there, the words were plain enough for anyone to read, but still she could not believe them, and sat dumb and stupefied, and incapable of feeling anything but the sickening pain at her heart.





seemed to rise up suddenly, and offer to bear evidence against him ; but still she could not believe it. "Oh ! what shall I do, what shall I do ?" she cried, as she rose from her chair, and clasping her hands walked up and down the room. She took up his letter again, and read it once more. There seemed something cold in it now, that was more evidence against him. It stunned her, and she felt so helpless, she had no one to consult, no one to advise her, no one at all in the world except Margaret Albury, whom she felt it would be impossible to tell. She thought she would write to him at once, that very moment, and ask him to tell her what it all meant, but then how could she, for if it was all true, it would be too humiliating, too dreadful to get confirmation in his own hand-writing, that dear writing that had never yet brought anything but happiness and sweetness into her life.

How the hours of that long morning dragged by she never knew ; she did not move from her place ; she told the servant she had a headache, and took no food ; there she sat reading over and over again the words in the two letters before her, wondering if it could be only yesterday that she had been with him, hanging on his arm, and hearing him say he loved her. She felt certain something must happen soon—this could not be true—and she would go on just the same, and she would live there as if all that had been was a mere dream.

Early in the afternoon there came the sound of a double knock, and Polly, trembling and listening, heard the servant show some one upstairs into the drawing-room, and then aching and trembling, and with a sick dread upon her, she wondered if it could be Miss Clayton already. It was. A moment later a card was brought to her with the name she dreaded to see upon it.

Polly went to the glass and smoothed her rumpled hair, and adjusted the tight plaits smoothly on her head, and put her cold hands to her burning cheeks and eyes, and then she went upstairs to receive her rival.

Miss Clayton was a very pretty girl, prettier even than Polly had imagined, fair and aristocratic-looking, and she seemed lively and amusing, and tried to make herself agreeable, hoping to see much of Miss Dawson, when she went to visit her aunt. Polly looked up at her beautiful face and golden hair, at her well-made dress and dainty gloves, and then her heart sank. "No," she thought, "he cannot love *me* when he has seen *her*."

"It is such a charming place, the most lovely in the world, I think," Miss Clayton told Polly, speaking of Benthwaite. I am sure you will be delighted with it, and your aunt is a sweet old lady, and has a garden full of flowers, and a large tabby cat, and two love-birds; once she kept silkworms, and I used to go and see them when I was a little girl, and firmly believed that she grew her own silk gowns."

"Do you live at Benthwaite?" Polly asked chokingly.

"No, but I am going to live there. I have been there on and off a great deal ever since I can remember. I am very fond of it—I ought to be," and she looked up brightly, while a shot seemed to go to Polly's heart. "I have spent my happiest days there, and shall probably spend the happiest to come there. There's not much society," she continued. She had an agreeable way of rattling on. "All the people are quiet and staid and well-behaved, getting born, married, and buried at the proper intervals and most convenient seasons, giving a few dinner parties in between, and taking a laudable interest in the parish charities, and ambitions, and shortcomings. But everything seems like a part of the other things around it, and fits in, and seems come down from heaven on purpose to add to the uniformity of the whole. It is the one place I can be quiet in myself. I am sure you will like it, it seems like the next place to Heaven I think; just a stage short. There now, Miss Dawson, I am sure I have made you long to come."

Polly listened to her visitor's pleasant chatter almost

wonderstruck, with a miserable longing to rush away from her, and lie down, and die, or to kneel at her feet and entreat her not to marry that man. She had wealth, beauty—everything which she had not; surely she might be content? Oh, she was mad, she must be mad. One lingering doubt she determined to set at rest.

"Miss Clayton," she said suddenly, as her visitor rose to go, "are you going to be married to Mr. Richard Brandford?" She did not say she knew him. Miss Clayton looked surprised. Well she might.

"Yes," she replied. "I thought perhaps you knew," she added. "You must come and see us when you are at Benthwaite, we shall be there at the end of the summer."

"I shall never go to Benthwaite, I think," Polly answered, in a low voice.

"But why not, it is a lovely place, and your aunt is longing to see you? You must come and get braced up in the northern air, Miss Dawson, and I shall be so glad to see you;" and she held out her hand to say good-bye.

"Have you been engaged long?" Polly asked desperately.

"Why, yes, in sort of way, ever since we were children," she answered. Then every thought of self died out of the girl's heart as the old love rose in it—love which was strong enough to be glad for his happiness, even at the expense of her own.

"I hope you will be very happy," she said, as softly and humbly as Rebecca laid her jewels at Rowena's feet, while she looked up, as hopelessly as the Jewess did, at the fair and beautiful face.

"I cannot understand it," she said sorrowfully, when her rival had gone, and her lips began to tremble, and her eyes to fill with tears. She had learnt to love him so much. Her mother and Jack were gone, and she had no one else even to like; no sister, no friend, no girl-companion, not even the remembrance of any one.

He was first and last, the one person she had loved above and beyond all others, and he had treated her thus, and yet she could not be angry with him. "How could he look at me when he had seen her?" she repeated. Then she pulled out his letter, the last she was ever to receive from him, and read it once more, and kissed it again and again, and bent her head down upon it on the arm of the chair, and sobbed bitterly. "I can't be angry with him, I love him so," she exclaimed; "but oh! what can it all mean?"

Suddenly a terrible thought struck her, it made her heart stand still, while a crimson flush dyed her cheeks and brow and throat. "He said yesterday he was very fond of me; but he said not a word about marrying me;" and breathless, and staggered, she reviewed the whole of that happy journey. "Oh, my goodness! he thinks perhaps I am only the lawyer's daughter, whom all his people have patronised. Oh, it can't be, he can't be so contemptible or so cruel." She rose and walked up and down, restless with indignation. "It is no use flinching or disguising the bitter truth from myself, or being afraid to think it, that must be it. Oh, how blind I have been. He does not even say one single word of regret at going in his letter; no doubt he was glad. He thought me good enough to flirt with, but not good enough to marry." And as this view of the case presented itself to her mind, a dozen things, even his plain speaking, and his correction of her faults seemed to strengthen it.

"I know what I will do," she said, presently, in a quiet, determined tone. All her tears and sobs had vanished, and a feeling of scorn for him, and shame for herself had taken their place. "He shall not think he has done just as he pleased with me. I will write to him as if I had heard nothing. I've just time before the post goes out." There was some comfort in this idea, and wild with miserable excitement, she ran upstairs to get her writing materials, and then discovering that she had left her keys downstairs, she opened her

mother's desk, and drew out the sheets of note-paper, which, at another time, from reverence, she would not have used for all the world. Putting the desk on the table before her she knelt down, and after many attempts wrote this, her last letter to the man she loved so dearly.

"DEAR MR. BRANDFORD,—I write to tell you that I am very sorry about yesterday, for I fear I said a great many things I did not mean. Will you please not write to me any more? Yours sincerely,

"MARY DAWSON."

She folded and directed it to the Laurels at Benthwite, and went out, and posted it herself. The excitement had died away when she came back, and she went slowly up-stairs to put away her mother's desk. She repented already of using it. She put back the pen and paper tenderly, and looked sadly at the contents of the little desk which she had never dared look at before. In one corner of it a cardboard box caught her eye, and she pulled it out. It contained the little brooch she had bought for her mother long ago, and she read, through her tears, the inscription on the lid. "*For my dear good daughter Polly when I am dead.*" "Oh, mamma," she cried, "oh, mother, mother, if I only had you still," and she knelt down and hid her face in her hands, and sobbed again as if her heart would break. "I will try," she cried, passionately, as she knelt there; "I will try to do right and to be good, so that I may come to you and Jack some day, mother;" and her thoughts went off again to Richard Brandford, and she choked down the miserable aching and sense of pain and shame. "I hope he will be happy; oh, my dear, I hope you will be very, very happy all your life long!"

CHAPTER XV.

THE LAWYER TELLS POLLY THE NEWS.



OLLY waited day after day for an answer to her letter, but none came. She hardly expected one, she knew he was too proud even to defend himself. She regretted her cold words to him then. "They were my last," she said; "I might have made them kind." A woman so soon forgives a wrong when her heart is concerned, and Richard Brandford was already pardoned, but she did not hear from him again. "If he had even sent me a single line of regret, and good-bye, I could have borne it better," she said; but none came. It seemed as if life was a burden almost too terrible to bear at first. Then, in the bitter waking and loneliness which followed on her sorrow—the greatest that girlhood ever knows, and one which often tinges a whole life with its bitterness—her thoughts went back to Jack's question of long ago—"Are you afraid?" She struggled with the pain at her heart, and tried with all her might to find the right, and to do it. "If I could only be of some use in the world," she said; "if I could only be of some good I should be more content; but now I am just so much human lumber taking up the world's light and life and shelter, and giving back nothing in return. It is of no use trying to do anything for papa, he only gets angry;" and so she went on longing.

She did try to find work to do, but it was almost useless; her heart could not forget its bitterness nor its tenderness. "I used to long to do good and well, but I do not seem to care at all now what I do, or what I become," she

cried. So there was brought home to Polly, as to many another, that the light which one thinks one loves for its own brightness, is often loved more, for that which we see more clearly in its reflection—that all our strivings and strugglings, however noble the motives we may imagine for ourselves, may be all just to win or keep one human love.

The first thing that roused Polly from herself was the strange conduct of her father. He told her nervously one morning, that he expected some visitors shortly, and desired her to make the house look nice; “and, perhaps,” he said, “you might buy a few things—flowers in pots, and so on—things that women like, you know, Polly. Can you suggest anything, not too expensive, with which we could make the place look better? The lady who is coming is very particular—quite different from your mother,” he added; looking at Polly keenly, yet half afraid, for he dreaded telling her, and had put it off from day to day, until it was almost impossible to do so any longer. But Polly suspected nothing.

“Why, dear papa, everything is so shabby, it would take a fortune to make the house nice.”

“We can’t renew everything, my dear, but we might do a little.”

“Perhaps if we had the piano tuned,” said Polly. “If she tried it, I am sure she would say it was a dreadful tin-kettle.”

“Yes, that is a very good idea. Is there anything else we could do?” Polly began to think her father was a little distracted in his mind, and looked up at him wonderingly.

“We might buy some white lace curtains,” she answered; “nothing looks so pretty as white curtains. Of course the drawing-room carpet is dreadfully shabby; it is all in holes, but the chairs are put over the worst places, and it would look much better with white curtains.” The lawyer considered a few minutes.

“We’ll buy some white curtains, and have them put up at once; and perhaps we might buy a new

carpet, and some gimcracks to put about. You shall get them, Polly, but you won't get very expensive ones, my dear?" Polly felt certain that her father must be mad.

"A new carpet, papa!"

"Yes—yes,—my dear. You know how anxious I am for your welfare, Polly; you know how I have always struggled for you, and I think you must be lonely, my dear—very lonely sometimes. I should like you to see a little more society. You would like that, wouldn't you, Polly."

"I can't understand why you suddenly think of this, papa," she answered; more astonished than ever.

"I will tell you more about it—not now, not now," he said, glad of any excuse to put it off, "I must go out. Then, Polly, you must get the things, and, perhaps, I'll buy the carpet myself."

In a few days' time the dingy house was looking far brighter and better than it had in Polly's memory; and the lawyer himself went carefully over it, and examined the drawing-room, and approved of what Polly had bought.

He came home early on the evening of the day he had gone into the smartened drawing-room, and entering his study, shut the door as usual, leaving Polly with a book, and her elbows on her knees, and her thoughts, as usual, speeding far away to Benthwaite. She always dreaded the day that would bring her news of Richard Brandford's marriage; and tried again and again to persuade herself there might yet be some mistake, but felt that, had there been, of course he would have made some sign before this.

"I must rouse myself," she thought; "and try and do something. I don't want society as papa suddenly thinks; but I want to find some satisfying work. Only I don't feel well. I can't walk as I did, either, perhaps I am getting ill." She got up and looked at herself in the glass, not with her old vanity, and desire of seeing her own bloom in perfection, but critically and gravely. She did not look well. In the last two or

three weeks Polly's face had grown paler, and thinner, and graver than it had been since Jack and her mother died, and in her eyes now there was a light that had not been there even in those bitter days, a feverish brightness that did not come of health.

"Polly," called the lawyer's voice from within. "Come here." And she went. "Sit down, Polly, sit down, my dear, I want to talk to you;" then Polly, amazed, sat down, wondering what her father could want to talk to her about. Never before, in all the time they had been alone together, had he called her in thus. His manner had altered lately, too, he seemed trying to be affectionate, and yet not from affection; but as if, for some reason, he wished to conciliate her. He sat sideways on his chair now, with his face turned towards her, and yet not looking at her, as if what he had to say had been rehearsed in his mind before, and he desired to remember the manner of it.

"Polly, it has often struck me you must be very lonely—very lonely here. You know how anxious I am about you. I am sure it would be better, if you had some companion, some one to talk with, and teach you various things, my dear."

"Oh no," said Polly, amazed, "indeed I do not want any one. I like being alone. I mean, I like it better than having any one I know with me."

"I am not speaking of any one you know; but of an accomplished lady, some one better than yourself. It would do you a world of good, my dear."

"But papa, I would much rather not," she said again; perfectly convinced that her father was mad.

"And then, I am doubtful about the propriety of your always being here, without any one to take care of you—"

"But indeed, papa, I should not like to be taken care of at all;" the very idea terrified her.

"And as I said before," he continued, not heeding her, "it is very lonely for you, and it is lonely for me too."

"Poor dear papa," said Polly, as dense as ever, "of course it is. How I wish I could make it less so."

"You see you are a child to me, Polly. A man wants some one to be a companion, to help him, and be all that your poor mother was, and I have felt for you my dear, that is why I have decided on the step I am about to take."

"What step?" she asked, breathlessly.

"The lady I am going to marry—"

"Marry!" exclaimed Polly, standing up and facing her father, "Marry!"

"Yes, my love, as I said just now, it is less for my own sake than yours."

"Papa, I should hate it."

"And why should you hate it, Polly?" he asked, with less meekness in his voice than there had been a moment before.

"I couldn't bear it," she cried passionately, "to see any one in dear mamma's place."

"Your mother would like you to be happy."

"Mamma would be miserable if she could think of any one in her place."

"My dear Polly, your mother knew perfectly that I was master in my own house, and did as I pleased."

"You cannot be so cruel. Why it is not a year yet since my mother was laid in her grave."

"It seems much longer," he said; still anxious to avoid a quarrel. "One cannot measure time by weeks and months, my love, but by one's feelings. It seems years to me, Polly."

"Oh, dear papa, pray don't; don't bring any one here in mamma's place," she cried, bursting into tears, and, kneeling down by his side, she tried to put up her hands to caress him. But, though he did not repulse her, he made no response. "Not yet, at any rate," she pleaded. "I can't bear to think of it."

"My mind is made up to it, Polly. I have been chiefly influenced by a wish to do what is right by you," he continued, putting on his converted fox ex-

pression ; " and I am hurt, deeply hurt, at your ingratitude."

" Papa, I tell you again I should hate it. I couldn't bear to see any one here in mamma's place ; oh, it would be dreadful ! "

" Perhaps your Aunt Marie would take you on a visit to Benthwaite for a time." But Polly's heart stood still at that suggestion. She felt, come what would, she could not go to Benthwaite yet.

" Papa, who is it you are going to "—she could not say it.

" It is Miss Stanmore."

" Miss Stanmore ? Why that is Margaret Albury's friend, at least she was once, and Margaret didn't like her."

" It is not absolutely necessary that Miss Albury should like my wife."

There was a silence for a few minutes ; and Polly, unable to restrain herself longer, broke down and sobbed.

" Oh, papa ; dear papa," she said, " don't do it. You will not be happy. Margaret said she was selfish and cold ; don't do it. I love you, and will do anything for you ; but don't bring any one else here. Think of all the long years you and mamma were together ; are they to be forgotten in just a few months ? It is so cruel ; it is indeed."

" My mind is made up, Polly. You had better go into the next room again." She got up slowly, and stood hesitating. Then the lawyer spoke again. " Miss Stanmore and her father are coming here on Thursday," he said, " the day after to-morrow. I shall expect you to receive them properly."

" At what time are they coming ? "

" In the afternoon, at about four o'clock. They are coming on purpose to see you, Polly, and would be sadly hurt—sadly hurt at your great ingratitude. I hope you will receive them as you ought. Miss Stanmore is most anxious to see you."

"Very well, papa," she answered in a low voice. "Is there anything more I can do for you to-night?"

"No, thank you. I am too much grieved at your conduct."

"Good-night, papa."

"Good-night, good-night, Polly," he said, in a mournful tone.

Then Polly went upstairs, and throwing herself down on her little white bed, sobbed and cried, and struggled with this new trouble, which the old one (still sharp and fresh) made more bitter, until her head throbbed, and her eyes ached, and from sheer exhaustion she fell asleep at last.

She awoke in the morning with almost a start of pain—how different it was from that happy waking not a month ago at Ealing? But with the morning light the whole thing seemed so like a dream, so utterly improbable, that she was able to think it calmly over. She went down to breakfast with a face on which she had vainly tried to hide the traces of the tears that would trickle down her face while she dressed. The lawyer was too absorbed to notice her, and read the money article in the *Times* excitedly over and over again, so that he had hardly finished it, when the newsboy came for the paper. Then he got up, and scarcely heeding Polly's "Can I do anything for you, papa?" left the house.

When he was gone, Polly sat and considered the state of things, looking round the dining-room, which had been made to look less dilapidated, and hating the changes in it. She could not bear to think that in a little while a stranger would be there as its mistress; that a woman, of whom all she knew was that she had been described as selfish and worldly, would be sitting in her mother's place.

Suddenly she thought of Margaret Albury. If she could get a little talk with her it would be a good thing. Margaret could, at any rate, tell her something about Adelaide Stanmore. There could be no harm in

talking to Margaret about it, she reflected, for her father had not spoken of it in any way as a secret, but as a settled thing. She got up for a moment, then realising how weak all her recent excitement and sorrow had made her, sat down again, and finally wrote a note and sent it round by the servant, begging Margaret to come and see her.

CHAPTER XVI.

POLLY GOES OUT TO DINNER.



MARGARET ALBURY came round quickly enough, wondering why Polly had sent for her. She noticed the little changes the moment she entered.

"What a smart house you have, Polly," she said. "What does it mean?"

"It means a great deal," Polly answered ruefully. "That is why I sent for you."

"Well, I can quite understand it; your looking a little more respectable and like other folk is so remarkable, that you can be excused for sending off for sympathy."

"Don't laugh about it, Margaret, till you hear all. I am not well, and very unhappy. I thought perhaps you would feel for me a little, and talk it over. I have no one else," she added; and Margaret looking up realised keenly enough how lonely was the girl's life, but wondered a little.

"Well, Polly," she asked, as she seated herself, "what is it?"

"Oh, Margaret," she exclaimed bitterly, "papa is going to——"

"Going to what, in the name of wonder?"

"He's going to marry."

"Going to marry?" exclaimed Margaret Albury, opening her eyes wider than Polly had ever seen them open before. "I wish her joy with all my heart. Who is she?"

"It is some one I remember hearing you talk about at your dinner-party. It is Miss Stanmore."

"Adelaide Stanmore? Oh, well, I wish him joy. I should say he would be certain of it."

"Margaret, do be serious, and tell me what to do."

"Do? why nothing, of course."

"But I can't bear it. Think of any one being here in poor mamma's place."

"Nonsense. Your father must do as he likes. It's a free country. You can't forbid the banns—for, of course, he'll be married by banns—only costs a shilling; a license is much more expensive. I should say he'll make a contract with an undertaker before he dies to bury him cheaply—trust the lawyer."

"Margaret, I will not let you speak so of my father, Polly flashed. "I don't like it. We shall quarrel if you do it again."

"Don't be a young idiot, Polly. I don't mean any harm. Was it to tell me this news you sent for me?"

"Yes, it was. I thought you would be kind to me about it," she said, with something like a coming sob in her voice.

"So I will, dear, only you must understand that your father has a right to do as he likes, and, while you are under his roof you are bound to give him what help and sympathy you can in doing what he likes, unless, of course, it is anything absolutely wrong. It may be hard, but it's your duty—it's a hateful word sometimes, but it has to be faced." Then Polly sat and considered, and after a few minutes she got up and played with some ornaments over the fireplace.

"You are quite right," she said, in a low voice—it went to Margaret's heart to hear how sad it was, though her hearer never dreamt she even noticed it; "you are quite right. I fear I was a little selfish about it. I will do my best—"

"Ah, that is sensible; now let us talk it calmly over. Do you know how it came about?"

"No, indeed. I know nothing, except that papa told me last night he was going to marry her. Margaret, do tell me about her. She is coming to-morrow. Is

she good, is she nice at all? You said you did not like her."

"I don't," Margaret answered shortly.

"Why not?"

"Oh, I don't know. There's nothing to like in her except her beauty, and that's pretty well worn out by this time, I suppose. There's no great harm in her. She's selfish, worldly, and cold, that's the worst of her; she is well-bred and good-looking, that's the best of her."

"I wonder why papa is going to marry her. He never cared for companionship, nor seemed to feel the want of it."

"There's one thing, he's getting rich; he is indeed. The partnership is all wound up, you know, and my father tells me he is going in for speculation almost recklessly at present, though by-and-by he says he means to settle down again."

"What has that to do with it?"

"His getting rich, or being so, has everything to do with Adelaide's marrying him, you can be sure of that. What it has to do with his marrying her I don't know, unless he wants to be a social personage."

"Margaret!"

"Too absurd, is it not?" she laughed grimly; "fancy the lawyer fashionable. Perhaps it will end in his sending you to court in a long tail and borrowed plumes about your pretty head—you may make sure of their being only borrowed."

"Oh dear, Margaret, pray do not be so absurd;" and Margaret, looking up, took a long, long look at Polly's face.

"What is the matter with you lately?" she asked; "you are changed somehow. You look pale and worn, and ill, has anything worried you, anything besides this?"

"No—no," Polly answered, hesitatingly. "I think, perhaps, I am not very well—I am not very satisfied. I want something to do, perhaps. I don't seem to get enough out of my life."

"Ah, Polly, so many of us want a bigger slice of the cake than we get. The thing is to be satisfied with what we have, and make the best of it. I know what it is you want. I had it myself—I have it now—the longing to do, and be something great and individual, to feel one's self of use, a part of the machinery that makes the world go round, and not merely like a fly perched on the wheel."

"I do," Polly said eagerly, "I do;" and her face lighted up as if Margaret had discovered one of her keenest longings for her—a longing she had been unconscious of possessing until it was pointed out to her.

"We need not be the fly. We are all a part of the machinery while we go on steadily doing our best."

"If I could only think it."

"But you must, Polly dear. We can't all be to the fore, and do the higher work, very few can; but the lower work has to be done as surely, and after all is as important as any. The highest tower could not stand without the common bricks and stones at its base. Take your life as it is and be content, and do what you have to do with all your might, and as best you know how to do it, for one never knows how important the least of one's deeds may prove, or when one is making history. There is nothing more immortal in this world than human action."

"But one does so long——" Polly began.

"One must forget one's self and one's longings," Margaret said, impatiently, "unless they are likely to lead to something. Nothing is more terrible than a person everlastingly troubled by his feelings. Forget yourself in what you find to do. It is what you do that matters, not what you are."

"I have thought this last day or two, that I should like to be a sick nurse," Polly said, longingly.

"Nonsense, you are not a bit fitted for it, and would have to undergo a long course of training before you would be. You ought to know the elements of

nursing, of course. If it were a part of every girl's education to learn them, it would probably be the means of saving a certain number of lives that are now unwittingly lost. Keep your hands ready and your eyes open and wait, something will probably come for them to do. People always seem so much more anxious to do good outside their circle than in it. "Polly," she said, suddenly, "what does all this mean? Have you been crossed in love? So many heroic yearnings are the outcome of a disappointment of that kind." But Polly did not laugh, only grew paler still as she tried to say, "don't be so silly," and Margaret, looking at her long and critically, divined the whole truth. "Dear Polly," she said gently, "was there anything between you and Mr. Brandford?"

"Don't ask me about it; please don't?" the girl answered, striving to keep her secret.

"Why should I not? I could, perhaps, give you some help or advice. I should not laugh or be unkind to you, Polly, dear child. Why won't you tell me?" Then Polly got up, and half-shyly sat down on the rug by Margaret, and was encouraged by the touch of a soft hand upon her head.

"Dear Margaret," she said gently, "please don't ask me, and don't try to find out; please don't." She felt that the story could not be told in any way to the credit of Richard Brandford; and nothing in the world should ever make her tell any one that about him for which he might be blamed.

"Very well; you know best. I won't ask you any more; and of course I shan't try to find out. I never pry into other people's affairs."

"You are not offended, are you?"

"Offended! Why, no," she answered warmly. "You have a right to keep your own counsel, if you please. I'm not such a fool as to be offended." Presently they went back to the subject of the marriage. "You have not seen her yet?"

"No; she is coming to-morrow. I will try and do the best I can," Polly added, after a pause, and a long inward struggle.

"Suppose you come round and spend the evening with us to-night. We have a cousin, and half-a-dozen children coming this afternoon, to stay a fortnight. I have invited the Franklands to meet them—husband and wife—you will like them. He tells stories in the twilight to the children as no other human being can. No doubt he has had good practice—he has seven or eight children of his own."

"Is that George Frankland the writer?"

"The very same; come and meet them. We are going to have a family dinner at six, on account of the children. Do come."

"I don't think I can," Polly answered; remembering that her evenings alone in the dingy house were numbered, and thinking that she would like to make the most of them; besides she had no energy. But Margaret persuaded her, and finally she agreed to go.

In the evening, at the appointed time, Polly went to the Alburys. She thought it would be nice to see some children; and she wanted to meet the Franklands; she knew George Frankland's books well.

The married cousin was there, a gentle, tired-looking woman, with half-a-dozen children on her hands, and her husband away in India. The other guests were a little late.

"The Franklands are always late," Mr. Albury explained to Polly; "and they always arrive in a quiet, leisurely manner, evidently quite unconscious that they have kept one waiting; and if you tell them of it, they only appear to regard it as a mild and rather pleasant piece of news. But one doesn't mind what the Franklands do; one even likes having something to forgive them. Margaret," he said, turning to his daughter, "I told you I had asked Layton to drop into dinner?"

"Yes," she said, shortly.

"She doesn't like Layton," Mr. Albury said to Polly.

"I am sorry you asked him to-day," Margaret answered. "I was talking to him about George Frankland the other day; and he said he must be sour and cynical, judging from his books, and he should not care to meet him."

"Ah, I suppose he has read the book about the Germans," Mr. Albury said; and he turned and explained to the married cousin and Polly—"George Frankland wrote a book about the Germans a few years ago, and cut into them considerably; it was the fashion at that period to bow down and worship them, so it offended some people. He was quite right; he gave his honest impressions. I hate the Germans, so it pleased me. The Germans always seem to me to get the credit of virtues which the French possess, as well as a good many original ones on their own account. I like a man who lets out a little at things now and then, myself. One gets so tired of the steady sugaring that goes on with some people."

"Like a dinner with jam at every course," said Margaret; "after all the salad is the best part of the meal. It is very well for Charles Layton to sneer at cynical people; he is in the swim, and luck is and has been with him, and he has only himself to think of. George Frankland has a wife and a tribe of children to provide for, and does it tenderly and carefully, and is good and faithful to them, and never thinks of himself; and things have not always gone well with him. The one man has no excuse to be sour; the other has."

And at that moment Mr. Layton entered. Polly started when she saw him; he was something like Richard Brandford. The resemblance worried her all the evening; he was like a disagreeable remembrance; a malicious description of the other man. She could not bear to talk to him, to hear him, to see him. She hated him as she never had hated any one before on so short a notice, and she realised suddenly that hate and love are now and

then very near together, though divided by a wall over which one may never get a glance, just as the pathetic and the ridiculous are sometimes a mere matter of words at the mercy of the speaker. He was a man who was above all things conservative, yet thought himself a Liberal, who stood doggedly by his own convictions, though he spent few words in defending them, whose sympathies were with the traditions in which he had been nourished, and who stuck to those traditions, and was impatient at all the advancement of the age, even when he acknowledged its excellence. He had been brought up in a rather prim old-fashioned circle, and though he might stray out of it to find a chance amusement, or food for thought in others, he invariably judged people by the code of that first circle, and from the point of view it would have chosen. He had all Richard Brandford's love of air and sunshine, and he liked reading, though he thought he liked reading far better than he did; and books had this effect on him, that he read attentively and thought, but never reasoned about them to himself. He recognised the excellence of the emotional, rather than the intellectual side of them, though the emotion left him untouched. They wrought no change of thought in him, certainly never a sudden one, he was in effect what he ever had been and ever would be. He was to a certain degree self-satisfied and self-centred, and yet would never have been thought, nor was he in the common sense of the word, a vain or conceited man. He was kind and good-natured, especially when being good-natured did not involve much trouble (he did not mind cost), and he estimated most things at a certain marketable value.

Polly looked at him two or three times during the evening; now with a sinking at heart, and now with a certain feeling of thankfulness, as if she felt that Richard Brandford had escaped from a great evil of which he was unconscious. And then she thought of the man who had forgotten her with pride and tenderness, forgetting all he had done, and remembering only the days in which she had

thought him the best and noblest in the world. She did not know how her love was fast twining round an ideal thing that was not Richard Brandford at all, though she would never find it out, and that this love might so alter and beautify her life, that no matter what deep or bitter sorrow it cost her, she would yet have cause to be thankful it came, and grateful to the man who caused it.

George Frankland proved to be a young man, or rather, younger than Polly expected ; grave and with deep lines about his face ; but his smile, which came seldom, had a certain sweetness in it. There was an air of restrained power, and at the same time of dreamy simplicity about him, too ; and now and then he would look up, and make a sudden shrewd remark that took one by surprise. His wife was a pretty, round, happy-faced woman, with beautiful brown hair. It did one good to see her, Polly thought, she looked so happy ; a sunshiny smile seemed always about her mouth, and laughter looked out of her eyes, though she must have had worldly troubles with a husband not too well off, and a host of children—most of them babies still.

“ I never trouble about what comes to my hands, only what comes to my heart,” she said once to a friend, who found her slaving among her children with not a soul near to help her, yet with the happy look still on her face, and the sunshiny smile on her lips. “ And never waste my tears on money troubles. I have got George, you know, and there’s no one like him, I can tell you ; and the children take after him. There’s nothing bad in one of them as yet, though I do wish they’d leave off climbing to the top of the summer-house, and sitting on the roof. We shall have some broken legs some day, and no one near to mend them.” And this gives a pretty good idea of herself and her life.

“ It was my wife’s fault we were late,” George Frankland said, letting a smile light up his face for a moment. “ She was so long putting on her gown.”

“ He always says that,” his wife laughed ; “ it’s an

excellent thing to have some one to put the blame on, isn't it, Mr. Albury?" she asked, as she unfolded her napkin, and began her soup.

"It's an excellent thing to have a wife who won't give one a wigging if one is late," Mr. Albury said; a remark which might, or might not, have been a hint for Mrs. Albury.

"There now. Do you hear that, George? He always says I'm too easy-tempered," she added, turning to her host.

"No I don't," her husband replied. "What I say is, that there is something aggravating about a person who is always good-tempered, because he so often gets the best of it. You can never count on making his angry passions rise."

It was quite an informal dinner; no one stayed at table after the ladies; the children went up to the drawing-room, and some of their elders went in to see Mr. Albury's books. He had a valuable library; queer books in fusty bindings, which he handled as tenderly as if they had been made of glass—a first edition of this, an annotated copy of that, some books with rare autographs in them up above, and so on. Polly knew the room well, and every chair in it, and she never looked round it without remembering that indirectly she owed Richard Brandford to it.

"Let us go upstairs," Mr. Albury said at last, when the light was fading, and he had displayed his treasures to his heart's content. They went up, and sitting in a window-seat in front of a stained glass window that was in the back drawing-room, they found George Frankland. Around him, standing and sitting, and wrapt and absorbed, were the children. With a grave, almost stern face, on which there never appeared even the flicker of a smile, he sat and told them some wild, half-weird story in which he appeared to believe as devoutly as his listeners. They never moved, they scarcely breathed, their faces were set and grave; it seemed as if every moment their eyes grew rounder and rounder, and

brighter and brighter, until they almost flashed in the twilight. The grown folk gathered quietly round behind the children; George Frankland raised his eyes as they came, and a gleam of half-childish satisfaction came into them for a second, but he took no further notice of them, but went on in the deepening twilight—on, and on, until the story was finished, and with an exclamation, or a long-drawn sigh, the children were released from the spell.

CHAPTER XVII.

ROBERT PLEADS HIS CAUSE AGAIN.



OLLY came down to breakfast early the next morning, excited and restless, for it was the day on which her future stepmother was to pay a first visit to the dingy house. Polly had thought over certain things, and though hard it was to do, she had made up her mind to a certain course of conduct. She prepared the coffee, and the scrap of toast, off which the lawyer made his breakfast, and waited patiently till he appeared. He gave her his usual nod, but said no word; and then the paper came, and the postman with a letter for Polly, and her father, gulping down his coffee, took the *Times* into his study, as had lately been his habit, and shut the door. Polly's letter was from Robert Welch, and ran—

“MY DEAR POLLY,—I run up to town to-night for the firm, and shall be in London two or three days. I mean to come and see you to-morrow afternoon. You don't know how I long to see you; it seems to be years since I had a look at your dear face. Oh, my darling, if I could only think you would care to see me. I believe I love you more and more, the more I think of you. You don't know how good I'd be to you, dearest, and how I'd study your every wish; and I am getting on, my darling, and you could have everything you liked to make you look pretty. Oh, dear, dear Polly, don't be angry. I meant to write you quite a formal letter, but you see my pen runs away with me, and that is what I should like to do with you, darling. Yours more and more lovingly than ever I was before; only I'm not yours because you won't have me, but I wish you would, and if you do, there isn't anything I won't do for you, my darling.

“Yours again, and always,

“ROBERT WELCH.

“P.S.—Don't be angry with me, darling, for being at it again. I am always in dread of making you angry. I think I should die this minute if you were angry with me.”

"If I could only turn the love out of his honest heart into Dick's fickle one, how happy I should be," sighed Polly. "Dear old Robert. Well, there'll be visitors here, so he won't get much chance of seeing me alone." She sat down in her chair, and thought it over again for the thousandth time; it seemed as if she would never have done living over her past, and considering it from all possible points of view. Presently the newsboy came for the paper, and then she heard her father moving about and making ready to go out. He came into the dining-room with the black bag, in which he carried his papers, in his hand, and put it down on the table, while he brushed his hat. Then Polly did that to which she had made up her mind.

"Papa," she said, her words coming slowly, "I want to tell you I will be ready to see Miss Stanmore, and I will—I—will do my best."

"That is right," he said, but her words did not appear to give him any pleasure. "I am glad to hear it. I hope you always remember it is your duty to treat my wishes with respect. I am a kind father, Polly, a kind father, and you ought to treat me with respect."

"At what time is Miss Stanmore coming?"

"At about four o'clock, she and her father; her father will paint your portrait, Polly; no doubt he'll paint your portrait, if you look well, and behave properly. I shall bring them here myself, and want to show them the house. So have it ready, my dear."

"Yes, papa;" her eyes filling with tears.

"And Polly," he said, turning back, "you had better have some tea—and some cakes, or anything; and do your best, Polly. It will be a great advantage to you—a great advantage; I have been so anxious about you. I am always thinking of your welfare;" and he took his way to the office. There was no pleasure on his face at the prospect of bringing his bride to see her future home. He had lately grown more haggard and careworn than ever, and strangely excitable. His

engagement gave him no happiness ; the woman he was about to bring to his home treated him with unvarying coldness, often with scorn, and yet she fascinated him, and enchain'd him, and was his master. Probably in this lay her fascination for him ; for though he was impatient and reckless (in spite of the eagerness in which he had lately entered upon certain speculations) away from her, and followed her every movement with his eyes when he was with her, these were days when he could hardly be called in love with her. Many times he hated her, and could have struck her, while he grovelled to her, and begged her for a single word of kindness. He never knew in what her spell over him lay ; but there it was, strong upon him, like a fate, and he could not withstand it. He persuaded himself, too, that with her was his chance of fortune ; it was for her he had entered upon his present course, through her he hoped to launch out and succeed ; on her that everything in his future hung. There was no drawing back ; even, when for a moment, the thought of doing so crossed his mind, he remembered the money the Stanmores owed him, and felt that, somehow, that alone obliged him to go on now, or it would be utterly and hopelessly wasted, and lost for ever.

“ If she only knew,” he said, “ if she only knew,” he repeated, “ how she would insist on having everything in the world, but she shall never know all that I have done lately ; it will not be necessary to tell her all ; she would insist on the settlements then.” The settlement question had been a sore point between Adelaide and himself—she insisting on some provision being made for her, and he stoutly refusing to make any, beyond securing to her an insurance on his life. “ I will leave you all I have,” he said, “ everything I possess, and you won’t have long to wait for it ; I don’t think I shall live very long to trouble you, Adelaide, and you’ll be sorry when you think of me. I shan’t live very long ;” and he looked up at her pathetically, and felt an inward conviction he should go struggling on for the next fifty years.

"Then it is all the more necessary that you should provide for your wife," Grant Stanmore said. "The provision I shall be able to make for her is doubtful, and I am getting on in years, and should like to know that she was provided for."

"Yes," said Henry Dawson, with a sigh; and he did nothing more than make a will, in which, by some freak of fancy rather than anything else, he left the house at Kensington to Polly, and everything else to Adelaide. He would have made two wills had she desired it, for under the circumstances making them cost him nothing.

"I can't do it; oh, I can't do it," Polly cried out when she was once more alone in the dining-room. "It will kill me to see her here, a cold heartless stranger in my mother's place, and everything changed, oh, I can't bear it, I can't. I'm not as good as Margaret thinks, and I can't bear it;" and she threw herself down in the old chair and sobbed her heart out. She had tried to conquer herself; all night she had been awake thinking how she would tell her father that she would do her best, but they had been the hardest words she had ever had to say in her life. It was no use, she could not bear to think of another coming to live, as her mother had lived, in the dingy house. She told herself over and over again, it was natural that her father should want some other companion than herself. She had used all the arguments she could divine in his favour. She made out a good case to her head, but none to her heart, and she put her head down, and sobbed in her big chair over this trouble, as she had sobbed in that same place over all those, one after the other, that had come to her in the last eighteen months. It seemed impossible to believe that she was the bright happy girl of eighteen months ago.

"There," she said, "I have had it out, and I must try and do the best I can;" and she got up and set about seeing that the rooms were ready, and got out her best gown ready to put on half-an-hour before the time

Miss Stanmore was expected. She went out, and bought a dainty little cake for the afternoon tea out of her own money. She bought some flowers, and put them in the rooms, just where she thought a sweet-smelling rose or a little patch of scarlet geranium would be grateful to the eye, and make the expected guest feel kindly towards the house that was soon to be her home.

When it was all ready, Polly sat down once more, and looking round the room, thought the old, old subject over again, and as she was thinking, Robert Welch appeared.

"I found I could get an hour this morning better than in the afternoon, and it's a little sooner, so here I am, you see," he said ; and he looked at her with eyes which showed that he was the same Robert Welch of old at heart, though he was a more prosperous, well-to-do, business-like young man. "I am so glad to see you again, Polly," he said, as he flung the *Times* carelessly down on the table. "Now we'll have a nice little chat together, won't we?" Robert was in excellent spirits, his voice was more cheery, and he seemed less delicate than formerly. "What's the matter?" he said, suddenly and sharply, "you look ill, what is the matter?"

"I don't think I am well," she said, "and—and I am very troubled. Robert, papa is going to marry again." Robert jumped out of his chair with astonishment, and a hard grin spread for a minute over his pale long face.

"Lor! You don't mean it?"

"I do."

"What a lark."

"Robert," she said, indignantly, "how can you laugh, and you, who knew mamma?"

"Oh, I know, of course, it's an awful shame; but, I say, Polly, do fancy Mr. Dawson philandering about with a young woman?" She got up angrily and moved away, and sat on a chair by the table farther from Robert, and took up the *Times* he had thrown down, and pettishly began to read, staring vacantly at the first

column. Suddenly her face became pale, and she clasped her hands under the table and kept her lips tightly shut, lest she should scream or cry with pain, for her eyes were resting upon—

“On the 20th inst., at St. Mary’s, Carlisle, by the Rev. F. M. Smith, Richard Brandford, of Benthwaite, Westmoreland, to Clare, only daughter of the late Charles Clayton, Esquire, of the Mount, Carlisle, and Rutland Gate, London.”

When she raised her head, and Robert Welch saw the expression of misery, almost of desperation, on her face, he started with surprise.

“Polly,” he exclaimed, “what is the matter?”

“Nothing,” she almost gasped, “nothing at all. I am not well.”

“You are not, indeed,” he said; “they are killing you, my darling, just as they killed Jack—did you get my letter?” but she only nodded. “And why don’t you think it over, and come and let me take care of you; no one loves you as I do. Think how miserable you’ll be here with a step-mother. My dear Polly, do think it over. Come to me, Polly, and let me be your slave;” and so he went on with the old protestations she had heard so often before. She was tired of them all, they fell almost meaningless on her ears, but she was in a desperate state of mind at that moment—the man she loved had been false to her, and mean and cowardly—a stranger was coming to take her mother’s place—as far as she knew not a soul in the wide world cared for her except the man pleading to her now. It flashed across her mind that it would be a certain kind of escape to marry him, a final shutting of a door upon her past life and all its hopes. And then the yearning to do some good, or to be of some use in life, put in its plea, and it would be something to make poor Robert happy, she thought. And so she faltered. She looked up gratefully at the honest, kindly face, she saw him just as he was, plain and simple, pale and bony, and good-natured—she saw even in that moment his long neck and the rather badly-

cut collar, and the coat that somehow, as Robert's coats always were, was a size too large for him. But with the desperation written on her face fast taking possession of her heart, she asked, half in wonder, half in fear—

“Do you love me as much as ever, Robert?”

“More,” he answered, “fifty times more if possible. I have always loved you, Polly; I always shall, as long as I live. My poor darling, if you would only let me; I do not ask you to care for me back again, but if you'd only let me try to make you happy, I would devote all my life to you, you do not know what you are to me.”

She took up the paper and read it once again; then she turned and answered wearily, “Very well, let it be so.”

“Oh, Polly, my love—my own darling, do you really mean it—are you mine at last?” and he put his arms round her in right of ownership already. She almost shuddered as she drew herself gently away.

“No, don't do that,” she said pleadingly; “and don't call me darling and love,” she added impatiently; “I never could see any meaning in all those silly words.” Yet she liked them really, but because that other man, to whom she had given all her heart, had never said them to her, she could not bear that this man, for whom she had no heart left, should say them. She went over and stood by the mantelpiece, playing idly with the lid of a little mock bronze inkstand which stood on it for ornament, while Robert Welch looked at her—the low-browed, dark-haired, downcast woman, who had promised to be his wife. She was very different from the girl with flushed cheeks and sleepy eyes, and smiles which came and went like spring sunshine, whom he had first learned to love, and yet she was much more loveable.

Then he spoke. “Polly,” he said humbly, “do you think you will *ever* love me?” But she only looked up at him with grave eyes that slowly filled with tears, and lips that quivered but would not speak. “Never

mind," he said hurriedly, "I will not ask you; I will ask you something else instead. Will you go and see my people at Liverpool for a little while? They would receive you gladly."

She caught at his proposal eagerly, and agreed to it at once; and yearning for a little affection that was free from all thought of marriage, or giving in marriage, she said wistfully, "Perhaps they may like me a little bit, Robert, if I try to make them."

He had pleaded for an immediate union, but she could not bring herself to consent to it, though she felt it would be best, so he had to be content with the victory he had already gained. But she was ready and grateful to go to Liverpool, and that pleased him greatly.

At last Robert Welch had to tear himself away, his heart bounding with happiness; and yet with a feeling of not being satisfied.

"I shall come again to-night, if I can."

"Not to-night, Robert," she said, gently, so that he could not be offended. "I shall be so tired; I do so want to get a long, long sleep. I believe I shall go to bed directly the visitors have gone."

"All right, my darling; I'll come to-morrow night. I can't in the daytime because I shall be busy." And then he went; looking back again and again as he went up the street. "Perhaps she would look after him," he thought; but there was no sign of her face at the window.

CHAPTER XVIII.

ADELAIDE SEES HER FUTURE HOME.

 T was nearly time for her visitors to come ; and in her best gown, and in the smartened drawing-room, Polly waited to receive them. Poor Mrs. Dawson would have been delighted with the new carpet, the soft lace curtains, the blooming plants and the bright fresh flowers in the specimen glasses. Even Polly looked round with a sad pride of the place, and sighed to think how soon she would cease to be mistress of it.

She hardly realised her sudden engagement to Robert Welch ; she was too stunned to do so. As yet the marriage of the man she loved, and her promise to the man who loved her, were alike things to be wondered at blankly, rather than felt. She pondered over the latter for a little while from an outside point of view, and thought how odd it was she should marry Robert after all. Poor dear old Robert ; he had been very true, and she would be good to him, oh, she would. She would always be her very best and kindest, and study all the things he liked, and do them. It would not be difficult, she remembered ; and she went over in her mind all the little things that would please him. He should always have the things he liked best to eat ; she would make him nice tarts and puddings, he was so fond of sweets ; and then when he came back of an evening he should always find so pleasant and bright a home it should make his face light up with joy. She would make herself look nice, she thought, and wear pretty things for him, he liked beads, and flowers, and bows ; and she would deck herself out in them again, and try

to look glad to see him. She would not run to meet him, she thought. Robert was inclined to be a little too demonstrative, for that idea to be pleasant; but she would have a cheerful fire, and a tempting table, and look wifely, and home-like; and be interested in what he had been doing in the day, and she would think of things he liked to tell him. She would make him keep up his boating, too, that would make him happy; and she would learn to steer, and then they could talk about that. It was odd how she wondered blankly, what they would talk about, and what Robert would find to say when the great theme of conversation—his longing to marry her, and promises of devotion—was over; and when there were no longer a hundred things to tell her about—things that he would do “if you’d only have me, you know, Polly.”

So she sat and blankly thought it over, feeling nothing as yet but a dazed sense of surprise; and then she looked round again, and remembered that if she went to Liverpool before her father’s marriage, she would lose her last days alone in the dingy house, and she could not bear that. She would tell Robert, she thought, that it must be put off till the new wife came home, and then she would be only too thankful to get away.

Her father came home; and she got up and told him everything was ready. He looked nervously around, and appeared satisfied; and Polly, remembering the days when he was more miserly, perhaps, over an odd sixpence, than he had been lately, explained that the cut flowers had been bought out of her own money.

“That’s right, my dear,” he said; and for the first time in his life he turned and looked at his daughter critically, for he knew that Adelaide would do so half-an-hour later. And suddenly he realised that he would not be ashamed of Polly; that the thing that would most influence Adelaide in his favour, would be to find that the graceful girl, with the soft eyes and the beautiful head, who stood there in her simple black gown, grave and self-possessed, was his daughter. The knowledge made no

difference—it brought no affectionate impulse towards Polly ; he only regarded her as a piece of good fortune, of which he had hardly been aware, and had treated with neglect.

“ Papa,” said Polly ; “ Robert Welch has been here this morning. He has asked me to marry him.”

“ To marry him ?” he said, in surprise. “ Well—well ; perhaps it will be as well. I like Welch very much.”

“ He wants me to go and stay with his friends at Liverpool. But I would rather wait a bit till you are here with ——”

“ Yes, yes ; that will be better,” he said ; and gave a long sigh. It was strange how grateful the news of Polly’s engagement to Robert Welch seemed to him ; and the idea of Polly’s going on a visit when he first came back from his honeymoon fitted in exactly. He could not have borne that Polly should witness daily the subjection in which his new wife might keep him. “ I am sure I hear a cab,” he said, suddenly ; and looking out at the window he saw a hansom, from which Grant Stanmore was assisting his daughter to descend.

Polly sat down on the sofa ; while her father ran down with more alacrity than she had ever seen him display in his life before, to receive his visitors.

He brought them slowly up the stairs, seeing as he never had seen before, and as he hoped and trusted Adelaide never would see, the shabbiness of the way.

“ My dear Adelaide, this is my daughter, my daughter Polly, my only child now. Polly, dear, I know how glad you are to welcome Miss Stanmore, and how you are longing for her companionship here.” The women looked at each other, a long unmistakable look, and bowed. “ You must shake hands ; you will like each other so much,” the lawyer said nervously ; and Polly noticed that his hands trembled.

Then Grant Stanmore came forward smiling and bland, and well-dressed. He looked upon Polly as a

windfall ; he had not counted upon seeing anything so graceful and gentle ; for graceful and gentle Polly looked that day.

"I am delighted to meet you," he said.

They sat down, and were awkwardly silent for a moment. Adelaide had a worn sad look upon her face ; but it was a dissatisfied, almost cross, sadness. She hardly spoke to Henry Dawson. Polly saw her look at her slowly from top to toe, and then slowly round the room, and the dissatisfaction seemed to increase ; but she said nothing. Then Polly felt the blood rise to her cheeks, for there was something in the very rustle of Miss Stanmore's dress, that showed she thought the whole affair a bore, and a condescension ; and looked down upon them and their place together.

Grant Stanmore looked round the room, and smelt a rose, while the lawyer talked to his *fiancée* in a broken half-nervous fashion. "I am quite sure you are fond of are fond of flowers, Miss Dawson," Grant Stanmore said.

"Yes ; I am very fond of them," Polly answered.

"The roses keep each other company," he said, smiling and bowing towards her ; so that Polly divined he intended to be complimentary ; but what his words meant, she had not the least idea. They were rather silly, she thought, and she answered courteously enough ; but with just the least shade of haughtiness in her tone—though the idea of Polly being haughty seems absurd.

"Oh, yes ; the roses are very lovely—though I always like the first spring flowers, myself, far better than any of the beautiful summer ones."

"That is a very sweet idea ; but why ?"

"I don't know ; unless it is that there always seems a tenderness about them, which the sun takes away, I suppose, from the later flowers."

"What a poetess you are ; what charming conversations we shall have by-and-bye." Her eyes flashed for a moment ; she should hate him in ten minutes, she thought.

"I am not a poetess, and I should not like to be thought one," she said, stiffly, as she rose to ring the bell for tea.

"Why not?" he asked, as he followed her, reproaching her in a low voice for ringing the bell herself. He was a man who treated all women, save his daughter, thus; who had a way of fawning on them in speech; of following them about a room; of trying to look into their eyes, or to touch their hands; of lowering his voice, and hanging about them as if altogether captivated. Polly, utterly unused to this kind of thing, was embarrassed and angry.

"Why not," he asked, again standing in front of her as she rang the bell, so that until she had answered his questions, she could not well pass.

"I don't know," she said stiffly, "one often hates things without being able to define the reason."

"You like poetry?"

"Yes."

"I knew you did the moment I saw you," he answered, in a soft triumphant voice. "Adelaide," he said, turning to his daughter and speaking in a slightly confidential tone, "would she not make a picture?"

"I dare say," Adelaide replied, not appearing to take the slightest interest in the matter; and then Polly was allowed to go to her chair, wondering how it was that a man well-dressed, in a certain sense well-mannered, and looking above all things a well-bred person, could behave himself in such an intolerable manner.

"Do you paint, Miss Dawson?" he asked, still following her up.

"No, Mr. Stanmore, I cannot paint nor draw."

"But you will sit to me?"

"We will decide that hereafter," she said distantly, as she turned to the little side table, for she heard the servant entering with the tea-things.

"There is some tea," Henry Dawson said. Then utterly unused to society's ways, and to the ethics of afternoon tea, and with a sudden idea of being compli-

mentary, he said, "Won't you pour out the tea, Adelaide? it will look as if you were at home." Polly stood still, her heart beating, and a choking sensation rising in her throat.

"I hate pouring out tea," Adelaide coldly answered; "and I am sure Miss Dawson likes doing it in her own home."

"Your home too," the lawyer said softly. Polly felt herself shake with rage, as she poured out the tea.

"Oh yes, by-and-by, not yet," was the answer in the same cold tone; and Polly, watching and listening keenly, was grateful to her. Then Adelaide turned to Polly and tried to be a little pleasant, but all the time there was something in her voice that betrayed, even to Polly, that the whole affair was forced upon her, and made her miserable, and all the time she talked, Polly was remembering as if in a dream that Richard Brandford was married, and that she was engaged to Robert Welch.

"Do you like going out, Miss Dawson?" she asked.

"You will call her 'Polly,' will you not, Adelaide? I don't like to hear you speak to my child so formally," the lawyer said entreatingly.

"Those things have to come gradually," she answered without even looking at him; and she repeated her question in precisely the same words, "Do you like going out, Miss Dawson?"

"Yes—no; I don't know. I never went out as most girls do. I don't know."

"She is quite simple," Henry Dawson said, "quite simple and unspoilt. She will never care to go out much, will you, Polly? Besides," he said suddenly, remembering, "she is going to be married, are you not, Polly? And she is going to Liverpool, as soon as we come back from Paris, to stay with his friends." That was how Polly knew where her father was going to spend his honeymoon.

"Are you going to Paris?" she said to Adelaide, asking a question in turn.

"Yes," was the answer. "Mr. Dawson"—she always called him by the formal name—"wanted to go to a quiet country place, but I told him Paris was the nearest place I would go to, it is bright, and cheerful, and there are the shops, and the trees, and the light-hearted people, and we shall not be thrown too much on each other. We should be bored to death in a country place." There was a world of relief in Adelaide's voice as she spoke.

"But my dear Miss Dawson, if you go to Liverpool when am I to have the pleasure of painting your portrait?" Grant Stanmore asked.

"Is there a room in the house that will do for my father's studio?" Adelaide asked.

"Is Mr. Stanmore coming to live here?" Polly asked; a terror coming over her, only softened by the knowledge that her own days in the dingy house were numbered.

"Of course he is. I should have supposed you would have known it," Adelaide answered, in a tone that left no doubt at all about his coming. The lawyer's face at that moment was a study.

"My dear Adelaide," he said, "I do not know how we shall manage. I fear there is no room in the house we can make into a studio for your father."

"Let us look over it and see," she said. "Of course papa must have a studio. And then when we have looked over the house we must go. I am very tired," and she looked tired to death.

And then they went over the house altogether, and the guests looked into the rooms saying little, and passing on in silence.

"It is not a large house," Adelaide said; "are rents very dear about Kensington?"

"Very dear indeed," the lawyer said, shaking his head wisely. "After a time we might take a larger house, but we must be careful at first, and save, you know; we must be careful at first, Adelaide."

"I dare say I can make it look pretty," she said. "Of course it will want a great many new things. The dining-room is very hideous."

"I suppose it must be," Adelaide said to her father, as they drove away in their hansom. "There is only that or starvation."

"Only that or starvation," he answered.

An hour later Margaret Albury called to hear how the visit had gone off.

"How did you get on with your step-mother?" she asked.

"Pretty well—I shall hate it, of course, but papa has a right to do as he likes."

"Of course he has. You look very worn-out, Polly. I think you want a change; you are certainly not well."

"Margaret, I want to tell you something," Polly said, looking up; "I am engaged to Robert Welch."

"To Robert Welch. I never thought you cared about him." In this new piece of news Margaret forgot her anxiety to hear more about Adelaide's visit. "I always thought it was Mr. Brandford?" But Polly made no answer. "Are you very happy?" she asked, more puzzled than ever.

"Happy! Oh no, there's no one so wretched in the world, I think;" and Polly sat down, and put her hands hopelessly together, but said no more. Margaret had divined the state of things before.

"Where is Mr. Brandford?"

"I don't know. I know nothing about him—he's married."

"Married!"

"Yes. Please don't talk to me about it, or cross-examine me any more," she said, gently. "I—I—don't think I am able to talk about it. There have been so many things happening within the last year, I seem to have worn out my heart in grieving, until I have none left to feel anything at all, except a miserable restlessness." Sympathy would be of no use, and sentiment would be worse still. Margaret saw that.

"It's a pity you are not five years older," she said, in a good practical voice; "then you could take to politics."

"To politics!" Polly exclaimed, roused out of herself; though she was seldom surprised at anything Margaret said.

"Yes. There's nothing like it if you are miserable and restless, and just past a crisis in life. Nothing does a man or a woman so much good in a strained state of mind as taking to politics, and especially to Radicalism.

"What one would take to, if one did go in for politics, would be a matter of one's convictions," said Polly.

"Oh, dear no, a matter of temperament; a man's politics are generally decided by the private circumstances of his life."

"But why to Radicalism?" Polly asked, still astonished at the sudden turn the conversation had taken.

"Because there is an activity and restlessness—a pressing forward, a sweeping away, and tearing to pieces about it, that is more satisfying than any other shade of opinion. Does not democracy rise up out of the restless, moving crowd, that has work and disappointment for its portion?"

"But do you mean that Radicalism is just a mere craving for excitement?"

"It is exciting movement, and movement is the key to everything; it is life itself. And life is most rampant when we are young, and among those obliged to work. As we get older our movements get slower, and our energies less, and our craving for excitement goes, and the 'it saves so much bother' kind of policy suits us better, and so we go on getting far and farther from the crowd; our thoughts getting slower and slower, until the great stillness comes—which is death. It applies not only to politics, but to everything; if we are to live we must be moving and doing, for stillness is crystallisation, which is death."

"Do you care for politics?" Polly asked; for this was a new phase of her friend's character.

"I should think so. I watch every bill through the House, and estimate for myself the strength of every constituency."

"But all Radicals do not rise up from the crowd. I know I have seen quite grand folk described as Radicals."

"Ah, yes, of course. Radicalism as a whole is made chiefly of two classes, though there is a middle we can leave alone; and these two classes consist of the people who hate their betters, and think that they could do better than those above them; and the people who love, generally from an ideal point of view, those beneath them. This last class is made up mostly of young men full of excitement and longings to build up and pull down anything, so that the result is startling and different from what has been before. There are few old Radicals of this latter class, they tame down as they get older."

"Why?"

"Oh, I don't know; their feelings get deadened, and they find the even way of mild Liberalism, or of Conservatism, suits them better; it takes up fewer players, it is easy-going, and troubles itself less about things. As they get on in life, they get a sense of satisfaction that they do not belong to the people, in whose cause they may have clamoured, and fought valiantly a few years back. They get tired of the noise to which they once contributed, and gradually get as far from it as they can. So they come to look on it as a thing apart from themselves, and they are thankful to be apart from it, and at last, from sheer wantonness, and yet without malice, they rail at what they once supported. Just as some people without malice kick a cat that once, when younger, they nursed and played with."

"Margaret, you are the oddest woman I ever knew."

"Thank you."

"But you are indeed. I wonder if Robert cares for politics."

"He cares for Polly—oh, my dear, I am getting imbecile! I am making puns, for goodness sake let me go—and there is your lover entering the gate. Good-bye," and she stooped and kissed her. "It is a great pity," she thought, as she went out at the door. "She might have developed wonderfully in good hands; she will be sweet and commonplace for the rest of her life if she marries young Welch."

A month later the lawyer was married. It was a quiet wedding, and Polly was not asked to go to it. To her utter dismay she was told that Grant Stanmore was coming to stay with her alone at the dingy house; but the day after his daughter's marriage he got news from the West Indies. This news was that his nephew was dead, and Alfred Stanmore was broken down and ill, and longing to be reconciled to his brother. So Grant Stanmore sailed by the ship that started the day he got the news. And when Adelaide heard this, she was bitter indeed. If it had come but two days sooner, she would have been free still from the bonds she hated and loathed.

But the lawyer was triumphant. Grant Stanmore might refuse to do anything for his daughter, but he could not leave the estates away from her if they were his, and so he rejoiced in his own wisdom, and thought that all things were at last going well with him.

And Polly waited alone in the dingy house for the bride's return. She was not to go to Liverpool. When Adelaide found her father had gone abroad, and she would have to be left alone with her husband, she bethought herself of Polly, and sent something like a command to the effect, that the visit to Liverpool must be postponed for the present.

Part III.

CHAPTER I.

BRINGING HOME THE BRIDE.

NT was a strange thing—a sad thing enough for Polly to see Adelaide's home-coming, a fortnight after she was married. They drove up one evening in a cab covered with luggage, another cab following with still more luggage. Polly, with her simple ideas, wondered that any human being could want so many trunks. They came in, Adelaide looking tired and worn, and dissatisfied, and as little like a bride as possible. She forgot to shake hands with Polly, and entering the dining-room, she sat down with a sigh of relief in the arm-chair, and tried to wait patiently, while her husband haggled with the cabmen about the fare.

“Why do you always argue with people about a shilling?” she said to him, crossly enough, when he joined her? “what does it matter whether they get a shilling too much or too little?”

“My dear Adelaide, you have no idea of the value of money,” he said meekly.

“The great value of money is that it can sometimes buy peace and quietness, which you do not appear to know,” she answered. “Are my things all safely brought in?”

“Yes, my love.”

“Then I should like to go to my room. Polly, will you see that I am not disturbed?” and she got up slowly.

"Mr. Dawson, perhaps you will carry up my wraps and bag?" and she pointed to the cloak that had fallen in the chair, and to her travelling bag beside her. He took them up as a matter of course, and followed his wife, while Polly looked on in surprise. "Everything is hideous," she heard her say fretfully as they went upstairs; "but it will not be worth while doing much to this house. We shall never be able to stay in it."

"It will do for the present," the lawyer said pleadingly.

"Oh yes, till the winter is turned," she answered as she settled herself on the sofa, which in her letters from Paris, she had ordered to be placed in her room. "Be good enough to see that I am not disturbed," she said; and so the lawyer was dismissed. He went downstairs nervously and stealthily to Polly. He sat down with her for a few moments in the dining-room, an unusual thing for him to do. But even Polly unconsciously felt that her father met with his match.

"Polly, you will do what you can—you will, will you not?" he said, after a few minutes' silence, in a humble, half-entreating tone; "and you will be as careful as you can; but—but—I know she will alter things a great deal. She won't be controlled, Polly," he said softly; "she is different from us, you know. She has always been used to things, and she will be rich some day, very rich, we must remember that."

"How will she be rich, papa?"

"Her father will be very rich, my dear, and it will all come to her, we must remember that. We must do what we can, Polly," he said; as if meeting a trouble, that had to be faced in order to get a great good. "We are not rich, we must be very careful, you and I, my dear; but we must let her do what she likes, or she will go away from us."

"She can't go away now that she's married to you, papa."

"She would, my dear," he answered, in a tone of

conviction. "You see it's not as if she was poor now. She is going to be rich, and she knows her power." It was evident Adelaide had used her power even in the short time they had been together.

The servant came in to lay the cloth for the late dinner that had been instituted for the new wife. Henry Dawson watched the process anxiously, and looked gratefully at Polly when she got up, and twisted the napkins into a little pyramid shape, and put two little china jars full of fresh flowers on the table. It was odd, but he seemed at last to find some comfort in Polly.

"You are a good girl, my dear, he said suddenly." You shall be rewarded some day. I have left you this house in my will, my dear. You'll get it when I'm dead and gone, when I am dead and gone," he added. Surely it was an odd speech to make on the night he brought his bride home. "When are you going to marry Welch?"

"I don't know, papa," she answered.

"He's a good fellow, I am glad you are going to marry him. Poor Frederic was very fond of him. I'll make it up to him some day. I'll do what I can for you, Polly."

"Where is uncle Frederic?" she asked; "Robert is always asking."

"You mustn't worry me about it," he said, crossly. "And tell Welch, he must mind his own business. I will do nothing for him unless he does." And then the conversation was ended by the dinner being brought in, and Henry Dawson went up for his wife, but returned in a few minutes saying she was too tired to come down, and wanted no dinner.

So Polly and her father sat down in state together. They neither of them spoke much, they ate but little. He was evidently excited and worried, and far from happy, and as Polly looked up at him she divined much of what was in his heart, and her own ached for him. She looked round the dining-room, and thought of the

shabby tea over which, at this same hour, her mother used to preside long ago ; she thought of the sofa that stood once in the corner on her right, on which Jack had died ; of all her old life connected with this room ; of the happy hours that had been, and the few comparatively that she would probably ever spend more in it, and she felt bitter and sad indeed. Then she remembered her mother's words, "Be kind to him, dear." There had been no restriction on them, no condition, they stood alone, simple and absolute, her mother's one command, and she loved her mother, and would keep the promise she had made to her.

"I hope you will be happy, papa," she said. "I will do all I can to help you."

"We must make her happy," he said ; "we must do all we can to make her happy. Everything depends on that, everything in life. She'll go away if we make her angry or oppose her—she said so ;" there was a suppressed pain in his voice Polly had never heard before, and looking up at him she divined that this new wife, who had never given him a smile or a kind word, was more than her mother had ever been to him, more than Jack had been, more than even his money was to him.

That was the beginning of things ; in three weeks' time, Polly, walking through the dingy house, hardly knew it. It was no longer bare or shabby, not that Adelaide attempted to refurnish it, but she altered the rooms as a woman used to the world, and having a sense of its prettinesses and refinements can. There were chairs, and couches, and draperies, and flowers, and pictures, and cushions, and odd bits of china, and rare bits of work everywhere. Polly knew now that those wonderful trunks had contained many things, besides clothes. There were books too, yet Polly felt half afraid to take them up, for the new style of things was so strange ; and soon the piano—the cracked out-of-tune piano, to which she had sang so often to Richard Brandford, was sent away, and a grand one took its place. The one servant —she that remembered little Jack, and had stood by

Polly when her mother died—was sent away too, and a regular cook, and a housemaid, and a maid to wait on the new wife, came in her place. It seemed like a dream to Polly. Less than two years ago she and her mother would not have dared to spend a pound on their own responsibility ; yet this strange woman, who used no entreaties, and insisted scornfully on having her own way, ruled her father completely.

There were words between them sometimes, not many nor angry ones, for Adelaide was not a woman to quarrel vulgarly, but the result was that she gained her point, and the lawyer came out from the contest nervous and miserable, “ but it will come right, it will all come right,” he used to say to himself. He went out early in the morning, but he always came home to dinner, for which he dressed, and Polly put on her old limp muslin, and after dinner he went into his study for an hour, or came up into the drawing-room, and hung about his wife, who scarcely gave him a dozen words. He was evidently strangely excited about his work, whatever it might be—he kept it to himself—and would sometimes promise his wife anything in the world she wished, if she would only wait a little while, and be kind to him. Polly was not present when he made these promises. She generally retreated to her own room when her father and step-mother were together. She could not bear to see him shower on another woman attentions, he had never shown to her mother, nor bear to see the callousness with which they were received. But Adelaide could never forgive him for marrying her just two days before the news of her cousin’s death came, and her uncle had held out the hand of peace. Besides, she had always hated him ; she hated him worse than ever now. But he, more and more infatuated, waited and speculated wildly, and heaped up money for her. In a little time he thought, she should have everything money could buy, and no woman was proof against wealth.

“ If you would only wait,” he would say, anxious always and for ever, to defer the day of spending, “ you

shall have everything in the world, my love ; you shall indeed. I am working for you day and night. You shall move from here ; and have a grand house, and carriages and horses, and everything you desire. Only wait a little while, and be kind to me, Adelaide. I only live to make you rich and happy ; and to give you all that you desire."

"What is the use of keeping your money now ; when by-and-by I may have plenty of my own. You think money is meant to be saved. I think it is meant to be spent. I only married for ease and comfort, and I told you so."

"But you will learn to care for me in time, Adelaide. You will try to do so, will you not ?" he said, in his old entreating voice.

"That depends on yourself. I shall never care for you while you grudge every shilling I spend."

"I will grudge you nothing ; nothing at all in a little while," he cried, passionately. "If you only knew all I am doing for you, Adelaide ;" and he put her hand up to his face, but she drew it away ; not angrily, but with dislike she could not hide.

All manner of people came to call on the bride. Not many at first, for it was the time when people were out of town ; but as they came back, many of her old acquaintances sought her out, and were ready to know her again. The lawyer did not wish her to cut them, though he discouraged expensive entertaining as far as he could ; and so the dingy house saw many visitors ; and Polly wondered more and more at the change that had taken place in so short a time.

Margaret Albury was one of the people who renewed their acquaintance with Adelaide ; not that either of them appeared to desire it. But Margaret did it for Polly's sake. "I can't cut little Polly," she said to herself ; "so I shall be civil to her step-mother."

Mrs. Dawson's conduct to her step-daughter was neither unkind nor rude, it was simply indifferent. She neither noticed nor cared about her, though she was

always thankful "that the girl looked like a lady ;" and infinitely preferred going to afternoon teas and evening parties with her, to going with her husband ; and the latter was only too thankful to escape, for party going was of all things most hateful to him.

She insisted on Polly's dressing better ; and bought her fine clothes, and made her wear them, sorely against her will, for she knew how hard a thing it was to her father to see money spent on dress. It was this indifference to dress that won for Polly her father's good-will.

" You are quite right, my dear," he said, when one day, in his presence, she had declared she hated rustling silk gowns, and should not care even for diamonds.

" I like soft muslin, which costs a quarter what silk costs, and a simple flower that costs nothing, far better ; and so would every one else if the prices were reversed," she told her step-mother.

" You are quite right, my dear," he said, " always be simple ; there's nothing so beautiful as simplicity," ending his remark with one of his old favourite moral tags.

" Nonsense ; its getting cold," his wife said, shivering. " She looks ill and delicate enough now ; and muslin will give her her death of cold. She has the complexion of a girl who would go into a consumption if she played tricks with her health."

Then the lawyer started, and looked at his daughter long and critically, and said nothing. But when Polly let him out that morning, for his wife was seldom down when he departed for the day, he turned back as he was leaving the door, and said to her in a voice in which, for the first time, there was a little tenderness for the daughter who had always been staunch, and loving to him—

" Take care of yourself, Polly ; care of your health, my dear. There's no one else who cares for me ; take care of yourself." Then the tears came into the girl's

eyes, and she flung her arms round her father's neck and kissed him as she never had before.

"Oh, papa, it is you that must take care. If I could only see you happy—very, very happy." And all the way as he went to the city that morning he heard Polly's words ringing in his ears, "It is you that must take care."

CHAPTER II.

POLLY PUTS THE CASE BEFORE ROBERT.



MEANWHILE Polly's engagement to Robert Welch preyed terribly on her mind. She was miserable about it day and night; the more she and Robert were together, the more plainly she saw that marriage between them would mean a long, lonely, disappointed life for her, and perhaps for Robert too. She could not be so false as not to let him know the state of things, and she never disguised her feelings from him. But to Robert the one object in life was Polly at any price, and he thought it was only the way "girls go on, you know," and exulted in having caught her. It would be all right, when she came to Liverpool, and it was such a pity her step-mother would not let her come at once, he thought.

"If you saw aunt and uncle," he said, "you would like them 'no end'"—for Robert had grown slangy as time went on, and he had not improved in manners, "and, you know, they live a little way out of Liverpool now, in a house with a garden, and you'd be so happy. You would like it far better than being stuck where you are with Mrs. Dawson."

"I am coming as soon as Mr. Stanmore returns to England."

"But when's that to be?"

"I don't know, he has made it up with his brother, and says he likes being away."

"Do you like being at home?"

"No;" but somehow she did not like the idea of leaving her father in his present state of mind.

"No, I should think not. That nice step-mother of yours always looks as if she'd just swallowed an unripe lemon."

"I don't think she's happy," Polly said, thoughtfully.

"Don't see how she could expect to be," and Robert began to whistle. It was rude of him to whistle she thought once, and said so, but he pointed out that he only did it very gently, and it saved so much talking and thinking. They were taking one of their usual strolls when this conversation took place. Robert managed to get up to town just for a day once a fortnight—generally on a Sunday—and they went to church in the morning, and he lunched at the dingy house, where Adelaide looked as if she just endured him, and thought him a bore, and then he and Polly went for a walk together.

They never went far, and they walked very slowly, for Polly, who a few months before had tripped along by Richard Brandford's side with light feet and lighter heart, and knew no tiredness, felt every mile she walked now a terrible fatigue.

"But of course, I must walk out with Robert, when he wishes it," she said to herself; and so she went on and on. She was very gentle and kind to him; she never turned away impatiently now at the repetition of his love, and was always ready to talk with him when he came up to town, and go for a walk with him. But what dreary walks they were, neither having anything to say to the other, yet each feeling that one of them ought to speak; he thinking that he was very happy, and yet wondering that he did not feel it more intensely ("but I suppose one never does," he thought); she longing to turn round and implore him to give her back her freedom, to put her in chains and make a galley-slave of her, to kill her on the spot—to do anything in the world save what he did, and was going to do—love her and marry her. "If I had only never bound myself by my own act and deed," she cried inwardly. "He

seems like my doom walking at my side." Then she would reproach herself for her coldness. "He is so kind," she thought, "and so generous and good, and if he only would not marry me I could love him dearly as a brother; but then I never shall love any one properly again as long as I live, and it is in my power to make poor Robert so happy, and I'll try—oh, I *will* try." Yet all the time, her heart travelled back with her memory to the face she had last seen disappearing across the summer fields at Ealing. "I must be wicked, dreadfully wicked," she said bitterly, "for I cannot make myself forget him, and it is so very wrong even to think of him now."

That was how things progressed, until feeling strongly that she was not only being cruel to herself, but to Robert, she turned round one day, and begged him to let her off. But this was just what Robert refused to do. And so matters stood, until one day six weeks after her father's marriage, she sat in her own room and thought it over once more. She was getting a growing dread of leaving home. Her father altered more and more; he was terribly excited, Polly wondered if he was going mad, and there were deep lines coming on his face, and round his eyes. His wife took no notice; she went persistently on the way she appeared to have marked out for herself. So Polly determined to put the case before Robert once more, this time by letter, and ask for her freedom back again. It was very difficult, and her tears fell on the paper as she wrote. "It may be a wrench now, dear Robert," she said, "but I am sure it would be better. I like you very much, I love you dearly, as I might love my brother, but brothers and sisters do not spend their lives together, and we should, if we married, and indeed you would find out that we were not suited. I don't know why it is that I do not love you as I ought, but I do not. I like you till I remember we are going to be married, or till you try to make love to me, and then something makes me feel perfectly miserable, and long to run away. I am sure

this can't be right, dear Robert, and if I marry you I shall have done you this great wrong, I shall be the means of preventing your ever getting the true and perfect love some other woman—much better than I—would probably give you. I know it's very sentimental, Robert, but I do want, if ever I marry, to be very much in love with the man, and to feel that I don't care what comes while I have him, and I'm not at all in love with you, though I have the greatest affection for you. I don't know what I want, indeed, except to be free and to go away somewhere, perhaps, with poor papa, and never to be seen by any one any more. There is nothing in the world I could not do for you, more willingly than marry you. Of course I would not break your heart and ruin your life, I would far rather marry you than that. But, dear Robert, in a matter like this, it is cowardly to be afraid of speaking plainly, and I want to be free. I know I have behaved shamefully, but, dear Robert, forgive me, and let me go." That was what Polly said to her lover, and having posted it herself, she dropped in to see Margaret Albury, and told her what she had done, for Margaret knew perfectly how matters were between Polly and Robert, though she only guessed at what they had been between Polly and Richard Brandford.

"It's a great bore," said Margaret, when Polly told her of the letter. "I don't believe he'll let you off, for gentle as Robert is, and kind, he is to some extent a pig-headed man. I can't help thinking you would get on all right, if somehow you would make up your mind to let sentiment play a very minor part in your life."

"But how can I? If one is married and always with one person, one cannot help liking him very much, or disliking him very much."

"Lots of women neither like nor dislike their husbands very much, but yet get along very well. I am thankful I never was troubled with these matters myself. It's a pity you don't take up some strong outside interest. You are too young for politics,

as I said before, and after all they would spoil you. Why don't you try nursing? You once said you would like it. Get some good hard work to do. After all when you marry, the common interests of daily life may draw you and Robert together, but meanwhile get some good hard work to do, some muscular labour."

"I couldn't now, I am not strong enough," Polly answered; and Margaret, looking up, saw with a pain at her heart, that it was true. "Besides, all my keen interest is at home just now. I often wonder if it will end in papa's getting brain fever. I know something will happen, and before long; there is a strange sense in the air of a crisis being at hand. Oh, Margaret, what a bore marriage and all the business about it is to one. How I wish we were born with husbands, or allowed to do without them in peace."

"Luckily these things never troubled me. I dare say it is a great bore, and yet so many men imagine that girls are always thinking of marriage. They think of it far less than the men. They like attention and admiration, but they have no thought of anything beyond amusing themselves, though they know that in the distance marriage probably awaits them. Your good and simple girl only cares for the present, and never has a design that extends beyond the day after to-morrow."

"I think I will go home," Polly said; for she was not in a humour to listen to Margaret's moralising. "We are going to a party to-night—an 'at home'—at a Mr. Wilfred Wilson's, an artist."

"I am going too," said Margaret; "I hate their 'at homes,' but I mean to go. I'll look out for you." Suddenly she turned and looked full at Polly. "Do you ever see Richard Brandford now?" she asked.

"No," Polly said gently, but flushing up; and she went home. "Will you tell Mrs. Dawson I will lie down till it is time to dress?" Polly said to the servant who opened the door. "I don't feel well enough to come into dinner;" and she went to the quiet of her own room, and lay down and wondered what Robert would say about her letter,

and how it would all end, and if she would ever see Richard Brandford again before she died; she did not want to speak to him, but she did want to see his face just once for a single moment again, and see if he looked happy. She did so hope he was happy, and that his wife loved him dearly with all her heart, just as she would have done. Of course he loved her, she was so pretty and sweet looking, of course he did, it was no wonder he forgot the dingy house for her sake, and the little girl he knew there. If she might see him just once again, she could be content then, she thought. Poor dear Robert, of course he would be miserable when he got her letter, but he would soon find some one far better, and it was so impossible to think of anyone really breaking his heart for her—why, Richard Brandford had not even thought her letter worth a reply; but she forgot how impossible she had made any reply.

Presently she heard her father come home and go to his room, and walk up and down; she longed to go to him, but she knew it would be useless, he would only tell her to go away; he was always excited and worried and anxious now, and he liked to be let alone, and then her tired eyes closed, and she slept soundly until it was time to get up and dress to go with Adelaide to the “at home.” She would have given the world to stay away, but it was no use, she had to go, and so she got up, and when she started the flush had come back to her face with feverish excitement, and in her perfect dress and forgetfulness of self—for Polly had forgotten her little vain ways and all self-consciousness—she was sweet and fair to look upon, and fit to hold her own against any woman she might meet.

CHAPTER III.

MRS. WILFRED WILSON'S "AT HOME."



OLLY always flashed back into something of her old self with excitement, and she had never been to an "at home" before, and was anxious to see what this one would be like. Mr. Wilson was an artist with whom Grant Stanmore had made acquaintance; he was of no particular repute, but had made a reputation, and made it rather badly, as a painter of a certain school; and he managed to get together a good many people in his studio. He was rather too anxious to please everybody; too flattering and civil; too ready to lie down and be kicked; so that most people laughed at the efforts he made to propitiate them. But they amused themselves by going to his house; and came away to sneer or laugh, forgetting that, with all his faults and flattery, Wilfred Wilson worked hard, and had a wife and many children to keep, and picture-buyers were few, and appetites large, and bakers and butchers were determined about their money. It is easy to be above worldly pettiness when one is free of worldly cares; but many of the well-off and well-fed who went to him, forgot this, and laughed and amused themselves, and went carelessly off to their homes while their host counted the cost of it all, in more ways than one.

The large studio and the drawing-room were full, when Mrs. Dawson and Polly arrived. Luckily for the latter, Margaret Albury was by the doorway of the first room as they entered, and took her under her care, for Adelaide disliked "a girl clinging to her skirts," as she

called it, and had given Polly to understand this, early in her career.

"I will show you the people," Margaret said; "it will amuse me to point them out to you. Ah! wait a minute—how do you do, Mr. Warrie; written another pamphlet lately?"

"Well no—that is—"

"What a blessing!" The member for Corkshire looked up. He wrote pamphlets about the Ionian Islands, which no one read; he was considered a bore by most people.

"Eh, what!" he exclaimed. "Why a blessing, Miss Albury? The last one was very popular."

"Oh, no doubt, of course. I meant a blessing for yourself to get some rest;" he shook his head and passed on sorely puzzled. "Do you see that girl over there, she is a doctor's daughter; has mistaken herself for an artist, and her face for canvas, and painted it very well, hasn't she; there's little of the original to be seen. That fair girl in blue, with golden hair flowing about, is her sister; looks like a shepherdess without a crook, and as simple as a daisy—its a double daisy, though." They went on through the rooms. "Ah, here's Lady Bradbury; how do you do; going on, are you, to the Countess's; no doubt she'll be delighted to see you;" and they passed the fat woman with the diamonds.

"Who was she?" Polly asked.

"The wife of a knighted tinker, or some such person," Margaret answered, as they stood looking at the crowd. "How I hate her," she said, scornfully. "She is such an innate snob; talks of half the peerage as her intimate acquaintance, and sneers at people who have risen—a traitor in her own camp, and to her own people." Margaret was letting her tongue go with a vengeance to-night. "Polly," she said suddenly, "do you love the people?"

"The people—what these people here?"

"No. I was thinking of the working folk, the people that work—work hard, and love their work, and

strive to do well, and get sorrow and care by way of reward—not always though; we are learning, rather late in life, to respect good work."

"What made you think of this now?"

"I was repenting of calling the fat woman the wife of a knighted tinker. I respect the tinker. He comes of the folk that made the world fit to live in, and that will make it better for those that come hereafter. And yet his wife is ashamed of the honest trade that made him what he is, and paid for her diamonds. If I were in her place I'd boast of it finely. There's nothing so fit to be proud of as good work done. I'd rather be a good, useful washerwoman than an idle duchess. The one helps to keep the world clean, and the other to make it dirty." But all this was not said to Polly; a tall, fair man had joined them.

"I think you are right," he said; "I admire your sentiments, Miss Albury, and am glad they are not mine, though they are excellent. So are the working people at a distance, but when one gets near to them they are not so pleasant. At a distance, and in idea, they are admirable."

"All working people do not go about in fustian," Margaret said warmly.

"No doubt some of them have Sunday clothes."

"I am not speaking of artisans necessarily; I mean people of any station that work. It is the idle people I am railing at. I am not such a democrat as to think we can all live in the same sort of houses, and have the same number of things for dinner; but we can all earn our dinners, though not in actual money. The woman who makes the home pleasant and bright, and brings about those conditions under which her husband works best, who brings up her children to do right, and to be ashamed of nothing but of sin, who looks after her house, and encourages thrift, and teaches her servants it is wrong to tell lies, does her part in the world as surely, as the man who gets so much a year for the product of his hands or brains."

"No one ever doubted it. But before you proceed with this sermon, shall I get the tinker's wife, and ask her, if she would mind standing beside you, while you preach. I believe she was your text, and it's usual to have it handy ;" then Polly laughed, and the fair man looked at her, and Margaret understanding, said—"Sir George Barker—Miss Dawson." He brightened at Polly's name.

"I know your stepmother—she was Miss Stanmore. Her father and I are old friends," he said. "Is she here to-night?"

"There she is," said Margaret ; nodding in the direction where Adelaide, her beautiful face lighted up as the lawyer had never seen it, was standing talking to a group of listeners. An exclamation escaped him.

"How splendid she looks!" he said ; "she ought always to wear velvet and lace."

"She generally does now," Margaret answered. "Her aim in life appears to be to look as much as possible like a living monument to the memory of a fifty-pound note." Then Margaret went off to speak to some people she knew, and Polly was left alone with Sir George Barker.

"Have you had many discussions with Miss Albury?" he asked.

"No, not very many," Polly answered.

"She's a tearing radical. Can't bear radicals myself, so much bother ; and I detest the People spelt with a big P and all that. Do you go in for that sort of thing, Miss Dawson ?"

"No. I am afraid I don't know enough about it."

"Well, take my advice, and if you want people to like you, don't know enough about it. A woman like that would give one brain fever in a fortnight. What an awful thing it would be to live in the same house with that tongue of hers."

"She is sweeter of heart than of speech," said Polly, anxious to stand up for her friend.

"But it's people's speech one has to do with, you

see ; as a rule their hearts don't matter to one." He did not seem inclined to talk much. Presently Polly looked up at him suddenly.

" What are these people going to do ? " she asked. " Do they all come merely to stand together in a crowd, for there are not even seats for half of them. There is very little music, too. I think an 'at home' is very stupid ; I never came to one before, and am so disappointed, I thought it would be amusing." She was unable longer to contain her astonishment at finding that the entertainment only consisted of about three times as many people as the house would comfortably hold assembling together, looking at each other, and doing nothing else.

" Really, well, I never thought of it before, but it does seem very stupid when you come to consider it in that light. You do not go out much, then, Miss Dawson ? " it was rather a treat, he thought, to find such an unconventional girl.

" No, " she answered, " I have been out very little, very little indeed " — she stopped and looked long and silently at a group a little way from her. He followed the direction of her eyes, and saw that she was watching a handsome man, with a pretty, bright-looking blonde resting on his arm. They were talking to some people he did not know.

" Do you know the Brandfords ? " he asked.

" Yes—no—I don't know. Do you ? "

" Only by sight."

Yes, it was Richard Brandford ; Polly was not dreaming, she assured herself. He was standing not five yards off, and he looked just the same, as handsome as ever ; nay, handsomer, and perfectly well, not in the least heart-broken, or conscience-stricken, as she had half an idea he might look if she ever saw his face again ; but the same, the very same as when she last saw him disappearing across the fields at Ealing. And Clare looked as bright and happy as possible. Polly felt her head whirl a little.

"Take me away," she said, gently. There is a room with tea; perhaps we could get some ice. It is so warm here."

"Oh, yes; certainly. I ought to have thought of it before." She took his arm, and made her way in and out of the throng. Her skirts passed over Richard Brandford's feet; but he did not see her, until his wife suddenly exclaimed—

"Miss Dawson? Yes; so it is. How do you do?"

"How do you do?" she answered, bowing to Richard Brandford; who said not a word, though he returned the bow, and looked at her calmly and critically with his soft brown eyes. It made Polly's heart throb with pain and shame.

"I wanted to come and see you," Clare said; "but do you know I forgot your address, and Dick said he had lost it."

"Oh; it does not matter. I am sure you have no time." The words were said so gently it was impossible to take offence.

"She looks very ill," Richard Brandford said, when Polly had passed on.

"She looks very ill indeed," Clare answered. "I shall tell her aunt so, and make her invite her to Benthwaite."

Margaret Albury was in the tea-room. She started when she saw Polly's face. "What is the matter?" she asked.

"I am very tired, and long to go home; but Mrs. Dawson is not ready yet."

"Wait here, I will go and see; and if not, we are going, and can drop you. I hate draining the dregs of a party, and people are beginning to thin a little. It is one of those entertainments that only do when at their best, and effervescing." She went back to the studio, and made her way to Adelaide.

"Adelaide," she said; "your step-daughter is tired, and wants to go home."

"I am not ready yet," she answered.

"Very well. We will take her. Oh, how do you do, Mr. Brandford. I did not know you were in town ;" and she passed on. "Come Polly," she said ; "mamma is waiting for us." Sir George took charge of them, and found their wraps, and, with Mr. Wilson, saw them to the brougham. As Polly left the house she chanced to look back, and saw Richard Brandford in the hall watching her, half wondering, half cynical.

"Thank you; good night, Mr. Wilson. It has been a delightful evening," Margaret said; and they went on. "I am sure it hasn't; but one must say something. I always dislike his parties."

"Then why do you go to his house, and be civil to him, and accept his hospitality?" Polly asked indignantly.

"Because other people do, I suppose."

"Why do they go?"

"Because hypocrisy is the cement that holds society together; and civility the varnish with which it is gilded."

"But I don't see how Mr. Wells is necessary to assist in holding society together."

"He is not necessary to society; but society is necessary to him and his well-doing; so he propitiates it, and vanity gets the propitiation accepted."

"Oh; but why do you go individually?"

"For the same reason that half the people, if the question were put individually, would give you—Why shouldn't I? It is easy to swim with the tide; why should I take the trouble to swim against it?"

"Oh."

"He is getting on, though. He had better people there to-night than he had last year, and I am glad of it. The people who go care nothing for the man. I do. He bores me, and irritates me; but there's a great deal of good in him. A man, perhaps, has no business to get a wife and children about him, unless he can keep them properly. That is another question. But having got them, one can't help admiring the unselfishness and

steadfastness with which men work for them, and stand by them and sink self in them. By the way, Polly, I saw your friend Richard Brandford there."

"I saw him," Polly answered shortly; and the light from a street lamp flashed over her face for a moment, and Margaret saw how pale she was, and did not speak again.

Mrs. Albury was asleep, and Polly leant back and was silent till they stopped at her door. Then suddenly Margaret Albury put her arms round Polly, and kissed her. It was an unexpected kindness, and the pent-up feeling of the girl could not bear any more.

"Oh don't," she said; "I am so miserable. I cannot bear it."

"I think I know, dear," Margaret said; and kissed her again so lovingly, it seemed impossible that she could be the same woman that an hour before had sneered at everything. "I think I know, dear," she said. "Oh, Polly," she said, passionately, "I wonder how it is I am so fond of you. I sometimes think that when your mother died she left me her heart to love you with." And then the brougham drove away.

As Polly went upstairs, she saw a light under the door of her father's study. She turned back and knocked, the door was locked.

"Papa, it is I," she said. "Margaret Albury brought me home; Mrs. Dawson is coming presently. May I come and wish you good-night, dear papa?"

"No; I am busy. Go to bed."

So Polly went upstairs, and arriving there looked long and critically in the glass.

"I hope he is very happy," she said; "and he did look so. I do hope that she loves him dearly, and that he may be happy all his life long;" and then she cried herself to sleep.

CHAPTER IV.

IN THE SILENT HOUR.



HE second morning after the "at home," Polly had Robert Welch's answer to her letter. She was up early and waiting feverishly for it. He had thought it well over, poor Robert, and this was the result:—

"**M**Y DARLING,—I have had your letter. You say if it will ruin my life, and break my heart not to marry me you will have me. My darling, this is so. Oh! Polly darling, my sweet, sweet darling, it will kill me to give you up, I shall have no hope left in life, and nothing to think of, or work for. If you only knew how I love you, and idolise you, and will worship you all my life, and let you have everything your own way. My darling, I will never have a thought but you. I will give up everything to you, and be your slave; but don't send me away, or put me off now. I can't bear it. My sweet darling, if you only knew how I love you, and how I'm always thinking of you. I never think of anything else but you, not even when I'm at work, and I only wonder I get through it. Dear Polly, you must be happy with me, you must indeed. I will do everything in the world for you, but give you up, and that I can't do. My precious, precious dearie, my own, own, sweet darling. I can't let you off, it would break my heart, and only be the cause of my blowing my brains out.—Yours with greater love than words can tell.

"ROBERT WELCH."

"There is no help for me," Polly said slowly, when she raised her head. "I am doomed to marry Robert. Poor dear old Robert," for she had read his letter through tears that gathered in spite of herself. "Poor dear old Robert, I am not half good enough for you. I must have a nasty cold nature, or I should be happy, and satisfied."

"Polly," the lawyer called from his study, "Come here." Mrs. Dawson never came down to breakfast,

and was still in her room. "Come here, Polly," he said. "I want to tell you something. Do you think you can be trusted?"

"Yes papa."

"My dear, I may be ruined. I don't know, I hope not, and, Polly, if I am you had better go to your Aunt Maria at Benthwaite, and—and—she'll be kind to you because of your mother."

"Dear papa, I hope you are mistaken, but I can stay with you, if you are—may I not stay with you?" It never occurred to her that his wife would stand by him if sorrow came.

"No, no, you had better go to your aunt, or to Welch's friends. You'll get a home, I daresay. Don't say anything about what I have said, Polly. Keep it to yourself, and say nothing. I am going out, and—and say they are not to wait dinner for me. I don't know when I shall be home." And in a few minutes he had gone, and Polly stood looking after him, half-dazed. Her father's strange conduct had sent Robert's letter out of her head, and she sat down to think, and be still for a little while, and wonder what it all meant.

After a time her stepmother came down; but evidently knew nothing of the state of affairs, and was just the same as usual. And so the day dragged on, and the afternoon passed, and the evening came, and brought Margaret Albury to dine quietly. Mrs. Dawson had invited her, it seemed, and was more civil than usual to her, and talked about old times, and days they had known together. And after dinner, Polly divining they might like to be alone, stole off to her own room, and they went up, and talked still about old times in the drawing-room.

When it was quite dark, the lawyer came home, letting himself in gently with his latch-key as usual, taking his boots off in the dining-room, and putting on his slippers. Then he stole softly upstairs. He heard his wife and Margaret Albury talking, and stopped and listened.

"They were happy days," his wife said, "but what is the use of talking about them."

"I wonder how you came to marry the lawyer," Margaret Albury said, musingly.

"What could I do? We were poor when you knew us, we were almost beggars later on, and had exhausted every resource. There was nothing for it, but that or starvation."

"You were not in love with him, then?"

"In love with him," she answered in a low voice. "That was impossible. He was my last refuge almost from the workhouse, he had money, and I married him; but in love with him, oh no!"

Henry Dawson shivered a little as he heard her words. He had so battled with his nature for her sake—moreover love, even when tainted with evil passions as this love was, will yet purify, in a measure, the most selfish of natures, and he had been a little grateful to her for marrying him. He had felt exalted in his own estimation to know that he was not so despicable in hers, but that she could condescend to be his wife. And though she had told him a dozen times, before and since, that she had only accepted him because her means of existing without his help were exhausted, yet inwardly he had doubted her. One is always loth to believe, and apt to forget unpleasant communications regarding one's self. Now he again heard the truth, which in his infatuation, he had ignored, and it was so much harder to bear, seeing that it was addressed to another. For the rest he had no fear. He was quite aware that she was far too proud and too cold, too worldly, and world-respecting even to disgrace him, or in any way to ruffle the face of propriety. This he knew perfectly, in a dim unacknowledged way, and so he was not afraid of her. Perhaps he never thoroughly realised that his wife was a seeing, thinking, feeling human being, but looked on her rather in the light of a beautiful possession or a precious bauble; as he might have looked upon a diamond he could not bear to turn into

money, but the necessary setting of which was very expensive.

This was what his feeling for her had developed into, and he treasured, and put a high price upon her after his own fashion, and would have valued her regard. He felt so desolate when he heard her calm, deliberate words, as if all his hopes and feelings and pet thoughts were hunted out of the haven in which they had been content, and had no resting place besides. He was not angry with her, she was the one folly of his life, and we are always lenient towards our own follies. He only felt a sickening fear for himself and his own future, knowing what his position was at that time. He waited for what followed. They sat without speaking for a few minutes, then Margaret spoke.

"I have often wondered what made you throw Stephen Finch over as you did," she said.

"Have you?" Adelaide said, languidly. "We will not discuss it now; it would be treason to the lawyer," she added, with a short laugh. Henry Dawson was right. He had no cause to be afraid of her, she was even to be trusted to a certain extent in her confidences with woman. There was another silence, and then his wife broke it again.

"Life is a great bore," she said. "It is a tiresome world."

"It is what we choose to make it," Margaret answered. "We shape our world with our own hands, and it is not so bad an one after all. Death and sin are the only things to fear in it. Everything else can be fought.

"You have not made much of your world, if that is so, Margaret. I should think your life was not the most exciting one."

"I don't want an exciting life. I never quite comprehend that I live. You see I have no part; I am a looker-on at the play rather than a player."

"You never cared for money, did you?" Adelaide said, half wonderingly.

"No, I have as mean a soul as may be, no doubt, but it is not a sordid one, I never could care for money. I like comfort, but luxury would bore me, and much money—that is, if I had to spend it on myself—would bore me more than anything on earth."

"It seems so odd to me. It is the same with Polly upstairs. She has not a spark of ambition."

"Of money ambition you mean—there are many kinds."

"Do you still potter about among your poor people?"

"Yes."

"I can't think what pleasure you find in that. I can understand your sending them things, if you are sorry for them, but to go and sit down and talk, and hang about them, I can't comprehend it."

"I like them. They have so much sorrow, poor things, and sorrow is very loveable. Perhaps if the lawyer were suddenly a pauper, you would fall in love with him, Adelaide;" the listener on the stairs waited eagerly for her reply; "suppose he were suddenly a pauper, I wonder what you would do."

"I should go to the West Indies, to papa, unless he came over to me; no doubt he would." Henry Dawson went slowly upstairs, and shut the door.

The next morning, before it was time for the lawyer to go out, (though strange to say he made no sign of going that morning), Robert Welch arrived; he had travelled by the night train. Polly was making breakfast when he came, ready against her father came downstairs.

"Polly," Robert said, "You had my letter; it's all right, dear. I came to town to see your father. Has he gone yet?"

"No; he will be down directly," Polly answered.
"What is the matter?"

"Nothing is the matter. Did you know that your uncle Frederic died more than eighteen months ago—

two or three days after your father went to him, that time when I was here?"

"No; certainly not."

"Well, he did; and that's why I have come to town. I knew you didn't know, Polly."

When Mr. Dawson came down, he and Robert Welch went into the study together and shut the door; but Polly could hear them talking loudly, and waited tremblingly for the result.

"He died intestate, so all he had was mine; and Jack was ill, and my wife, and all of them, so I said nothing about it out of consideration for their feelings, I thought it would be a shock to them." Henry Dawson's eyes refused to meet Robert Welch's as he gave his explanation, and his hands trembled more violently still.

"He did not die intestate, Mr. Dawson."

"What do you mean, sir?" he almost shouted; "do you suppose I destroyed the will, or what? I only kept his death quiet out of consideration for *all* your feelings. I intended to do something for *you*, Welch, but it's all gone, and I'm a ruined man;" and he began to cry like a child.

"Your brother made a will just before he left England, Mr. Dawson, leaving all he possessed to your son, with the exception of a thousand pounds to myself, and that will he lodged at a solicitor's office at Liverpool. It will now have to be proved." Strange as it might seem, the words were almost a relief to Henry Dawson.

"If I had had any idea," he began—"I give you my word, Welch, I had no idea of such a thing, and I intended all I had for you and Polly. She's *so* fond of you. You would not be hard on her father, the only relation left to take care of her;" but Robert Welch turned away impatiently, and said nothing.

"Perhaps we had better talk about this again to-morrow, when we have thought it all over," he answered. "Polly," he said, as he came out of the study, "I will come and see you again to-morrow. I have some

business to-day, and I shall not have time to come to-night. Good-bye, darling ;" and Robert's strange visit ended.

Slowly and sadly the hours dragged by that day. Mr. Dawson did not go out till eleven or twelve, and at four he came back. His wife was lying down in the drawing-room. He went up to her, and, sitting down by the sofa, looked at her sadly.

"Adelaide, would you like to go abroad ?" he said.

"Where to ?"

"I don't know—to the West Indies."

"No ; I would not mind going to Rome for the winter."

"We could not do that—we could not afford it."

"It is of no use talking about it, then."

"Money isn't everything," he said sadly, words he had never said in all his life before, "it isn't everything," he went on. "Don't you think you could be happy, even if we were poor—very poor, if I devoted my life to you, Adelaide ?" It was the old voice she knew so well. She did not answer for a minute, and then turned away shuddering.

"There is nothing in the world so hateful as being poor," she said. It was no use, he could not tell her. He got up and slowly left the room. On the staircase he met Polly, and stopped and kissed her.

"You looked so like little Jack," he said, and passed on, but before he reached his study he called Polly back to him. "Polly," he said, "do you know I used to think that she had, somehow, a look of Jack in her eyes, that was why I came to marry her." Then Polly understood, and kissed her father, and looked longingly after him as he went into the study.

She never saw him again. The next morning the study door was broken open. The lawyer was found dead in his chair, and beside him on the table was a little pile of dusty books, the books poor Jack had prized so much, and read so often when he wondered about the way to the shining city.

CHAPTER V.

LEAVING THE DINGY HOUSE.



O death reigned once more in the dingy house, and the blinds were drawn down, and in every room the strange stillness that only comes with death prevailed—a stillness sad and grim, as if sound had followed as a mourner, the departed one a little way on into eternity, and had not yet returned from its strange journey. Polly sat alone in her own room, thinking it all over, trying to realise that she was now indeed alone in the world, save for Robert Welch.

She grieved for her father truly enough. She found, as many do find when death comes, that she had loved him more than she had thought. He had grown very dear to her in the months after her mother died, and during all those months in which she saw, but was powerless to help his loneliness. She sat; and taxed herself now, wondering if she could not have done more for him, thinking with that vain self-reproach, which is the bitterest form of grief, of a dozen little things, that in looking back she thought she might have done, yet which in reality would have been impossible to do. But so it always is in mourning for those we love, our hearts and heads suggest a hundred wise and tender things we think we might have done and said, and we reproach ourselves for only thinking of them when it is too late. It was odd, too, but the marriage that had been so hard a trial to Polly at first, had somehow drawn her father nearer to her. There had often been a strange longing, never to be satisfied, on his face, as he looked up at his new wife, which Polly only fully understood, when, that last

time she ever saw him, he said, "I used to think she had a look of Jack in her eyes." It was these words she would remember her father by all her life long, and for them she forgave what always seemed forgetfulness of her mother. She understood what, in marrying, the better part in him had been seeking after, and, though he had been merciless and cruel to his own soul, how lonely that soul had been.

It always seemed to Margaret Albury that there had been (as there are in most of us) two distinct natures in the lawyer, the one bad and cowardly, so that he had seldom the courage to carry out wholly the meanness or wickedness the lower nature suggested; and the other better far, yet weak above all things, so that its longings were only longings—and even these rarely asserted themselves strongly, and still more rarely developed into deeds.

Adelaide took the news of her husband's death calmly enough. It was Robert Welch who broke it to her. He came to the dingy house half-an-hour after the locked door had frightened Polly and the servants, and while they were still waiting for the locksmith to break it open. Polly was standing trembling in the dining-room, with the scared servants around her; but Adelaide, fearing to come down, sat wrapt up in a thick shawl in the chilly drawing-room above, trembling, too, with a nameless sense of fear and injury. For the vague catastrophe that seemed pending, gave her a terrible sense of injury, as well as fright, and she felt in the midst of all her discomfort, that in some way, the lawyer had cheated and taken advantage of her. She heard the locksmith come, she knew the sound of strange feet, she heard the jangling of his tools, and the opening of the closed door, and then sick with fear, she waited through the stillness that followed. She heard no word that was said, no sound, no sob, no expression of horror; but she knew that he was dead. She heard some one coming upstairs, she knew it was Robert Welch, she almost knew the words he would say.

"Mrs. Dawson, we have broken open the door."

"Well?" she asked, pulling her shawl closer round her, as if to nerve herself to hear the worst; but this was the only sign of feeling she displayed, for Robert could not know how cold she was, nor the effort she made to keep her teeth from chattering with fear.

"It is just as we feared it would be—he is—dead."

"I knew," she said, and they were both silent. "What caused it—was he ill, had he lost any money?" She felt money must be the key to it.

"He told me yesterday, that he was ruined—quite ruined. Did you not know?"

"No," she answered; and she trembled even more, realising in a second that she would have to leave the house she had made comfortable, and pleasant, and that she might even be homeless and poor again, unless her father had made his cause good in the West Indies. Oh, the selfishness of that woman's nature! There was no thought of Polly, no thought of the man who, however mean or cringing in himself, had yet given her the best he had to give, and who had ruined himself, and died in the endeavour to heap up money, which he knew beforehand she would spend. "How did he ruin himself?" she asked.

"He took to speculating." She made no answer, then she asked shudderingly—

"Tell me how he was found?"

"He was sitting by the table with his arms stretched over it, and his head down upon them, and Jack's books were by him." She realised it all in a moment, she remembered his words last night, and the hatred of poverty she had expressed; he had gone away knowing that there was no help or sympathy to be had from her in a struggling future, and he had locked himself in, and given way to the misery, and agony in his heart, and then his thoughts went back to the old life, and to those who thought and cared little or nothing about his money, and to the little son he had neglected; and he took down his books, but before he had had courage to open them, and in the

long still hours of the night he had followed him on into eternity.

"I should like to telegraph to my father," she said presently, "and to be alone. Perhaps you would see to anything you can, Mr. Welch. I know nothing about what should be done. I think if you could stay in the house, it would be a protection." That was all, and he left her. She had a fire made in the chilly drawing-room, and there she sat always in the same chair, always alone, always looking vacantly into the distance, always rejecting help and sympathy, passionless and silent, and yet now and then the tears would come to her eyes, and trickle slowly down her cheeks.

Robert Welch came to the house as she suggested, and attended to the inquest and all the painful formalities consequent on the death. He understood, in looking through Henry Dawson's papers, why Henry Dawson had concealed his brother's death. The evening the lawyer reached Dover, Frederic Dawson made a second will, identical with the first, but decreasing Robert Welch's legacy to five hundred pounds, a circumstance easily accounted for by the fact that all the letters Robert Welch had given the lawyer to forward to his brother, were found unopened and unposted, with the concealed will, in the safe in the study. Strange that criminals are so often loth to destroy the evidence of their guilt.

"It was too bad," he exclaimed; "he might have had the money, but to let my best friend think I had neglected him. I understand now why he concealed the death. It saved all unpleasant questions and surmises, and he could administer to his effects as having died intestate just the same."

But Henry Dawson had fallen into his own trap, for he had never reckoned on his brother having made any disposition of his property before leaving England; thus the will he concealed, because he grudged the five hundred pounds to Robert Welch, only made that one valid which gave him a thousand. Robert Welch never told Polly of either will. Once the money would have

helped him on, now he had done without it, and he valued her feelings more than any worldly gain. He contrived from the general wreck to save the lease of the dingy house for Polly, and two or three hundred pounds for Adelaide, and with this the latter went into lodgings, and awaited her father's return. Polly offered to accompany her, and was anxious to do so, though Robert Welch desired above all things that Polly should go to his people at Liverpool. But Adelaide had evidently no desire for her step-daughter's company; rather the contrary.

"You had better go to Mr. Welch's friends," she said.

"But could I not be of some use, or help to you?" Polly asked, longingly, remembering that her father had loved the strange woman before her.

"No thank you," she answered. "I am always thankful to be alone."

Miss Wood, Polly's aunt, wrote from Benthwaite offering Polly a home until her marriage, and begging her at any rate to pay her a visit before that event took place, and Mrs. Phillips, who was shortly coming back to Ealing, offered to take Polly in for a season. But Robert urged her to go to his friends, and she, longing to please him, determined to go to Liverpool; but she promised to visit her aunt Maria before she was married.

"You are quite right, Polly dear," Margaret Albury said, when she heard of this arrangement. "You owe it to Robert to do as he wishes, besides you want nursing and care, and you will probably get it at Liverpool. It would be too great a trial for you in your present state of health, and with this new grief and loneliness fresh upon you, to go to Benthwaite, for I understand how it has been," she added gently, stooping and kissing the girl's thin face. "And it will be better that you should go by-and-by when you are a little stronger, and see him again, with his wife, and in his own house, and realise that in his life yours has no part. Perhaps too, you will find out that after all he is

ere flesh and blood, and not the ideal being you have thought him. It will be the hardest thing on earth to find out; but it will make you a better and truer wife to Robert."

"Dear Robert," said Polly gratefully. "I will try to be good and true to him. I do love him dearly, though it is so thoroughly as a sister. No one shall ever hear me say again that I don't want to marry him; dear kind old Robert."

Thus it was settled that Polly should go to Liverpool, and at last her little trunks were packed, and she looked round the dining-room for the last time, the dear room that would for ever be entwined with memories of the happiest, and the saddest days of her life. Robert Welch stood by the window softly whistling, while she took that last look. He had no sentiment for things, and but rarely for people, and he was sorely puzzled at Polly's caring so much for the place.

"I say, Polly, it's time to go," he said at last; "don't fret because you are going away. We will have a nice home you know, some day."

"Yes, Robert."

"You'll like uncle's cottage. It's much nicer than when they lived in Liverpool. It's quite in the country, and it'll do you good, only its very dull; but, we won't mind that;" and then Polly was put into the cab, and her boxes on the top, and Robert went with her to the station, and waited to see her off, and said he'd come as soon as he could, and she was to cheer up, and get strong, and then he stood by waiting till the train moved. He was to stay in town a few weeks on business for his firm, so that he was able to wind up the lawyer's affairs more easily. "And mind you look well when I come, darling," he said. "You look very bad now, and the crape makes you look so sombre;" he was almost puzzled at Polly's sorrow, and Polly's deep crape. His own father had died so long since, he did not know the affection that near relationship necessarily involved, and he remembered well enough that the lawyer had not

been a particularly kind or affectionate father, and from his own point of view he was by no means a lovable person. Then, too, Robert's was a very elastic nature, and, from no matter how stinging a blow, he recovered quickly, so that though even to him Henry Dawson's death had been a shock, yet he had almost forgotten it, and this was hardly to be wondered at, remembering the lawyer's conduct towards him. "And you won't go wanting to break it off again, will you, darling?" he said, in a good cheery voice. She was in a empty carriage, so Robert could make his remarks quite freely without danger of being overheard. "Because you know it's all right. Lots of girls don't care so much about one beforehand ; but its all right afterwards."

"Yes, Robert," rather hesitatingly ; and then the carriage doors were slammed, and the train started, and Polly leant back in her seat feeling tired enough ; but in a moment she remembered Robert, and jumping up, and putting her head out of the window, saw him standing still on the platform looking after her. He pulled out his handkerchief, and fluttered it about frantically, a coloured pocket-handkerchief—he always used them, they seemed a part of himself just as the woollen comforter, with which Polly always connected them, had seemed a part of himself a long time ago. Polly waved her hand, and in a moment they had lost sight of each other.

"Poor dear kind old Robert," she said to herself, as she went back to her corner. "I will try to be good to him all my life long." She shut her eyes, and thought over all the past weeks, and thought of her mother and Jack—they lived in her heart still, just as Margaret had said they would—and of her father ; but he seemed indeed lying in his silent grave for evermore.

CHAPTER VI.

ROBERT'S RELATIONS.



HE light was just beginning to fade, when Polly got out of the carriage at Liverpool, and stood irresolute by the door wondering what to do. Robert had said his uncle would be at the station; but no one appeared to be looking out for her. Suddenly a cheery white-haired old man, with simplicity on his face and in his voice, the simplicity which comes of a mild sense of humour, and a blameless life, accosted her.

"My dear," he said. "Are you Miss Dawson?"

"Yes," she answered.

"I knew it;" he said more to himself than to her. He was evidently absent-minded. "I knew you were, directly I saw you. How amused Janet will be, to be sure. Come, I have a fly waiting for us."

"I have some luggage," Polly said.

"Yes, of course. I forgot about the luggage, of course you have luggage;" and calling a porter, he directed Polly's trunks to be taken to the fly, and in a few moments, Polly and Mr. David Welch were driving swiftly through the busy streets of Liverpool, to Farnham, the outskirt in which Robert's relations lived. "It is a long way, five miles," Mr. Welch said, "a long way, but when you get there it is a comfort," he added. "I often wonder how we lived in Liverpool all those years. We have grown young since we have been in the country." Then he looked long and critically at the sorrowful sweet-faced girl, who had come to him in the character of his nephew's future wife. "You don't look well, my dear," he said gently. "We must make you well. It's a pity the summer is over, it would have done

you a world of good to walk about the garden, and see the sunflowers."

"The sunflowers?" Polly said.

"Yes, the sunflowers. Our garden was full of them. I used to see so many sunflowers when I was a boy; but people don't grow them now, so foolish of them, there's no flower like it for making one think of the summer, and the sun; when we came to the cottage I had the garden filled with them;" he stopped as if expecting her to say something.

"Well?" she said.

"Well," he repeated in a satisfied voice, feeling she had given him leave to go on. "Well, Janet likes them just as much as I do, so we had the garden filled with them, sunflowers, and sweet-peas, and the bee-hives at the end. It would have done you a world of good to walk about the garden, my dear," and he took another long look at her, and turned away saying to himself, but so that Polly heard him plainly enough, "very charming, very charming, not strong though, poor thing."

"You have not asked after Robert," Polly said, gently, half-wondering at his forgetfulness.

"No, to be sure I have not," he answered beamingly, as if pleased to be reminded of the omission. "How is the boy, my dear? He's much stronger then he used to be, and much more careful, wraps up in the winter, and puts on a mustard-leaf if he has been in a draught. He's not what I was, never had a cold in my life nor wore an inch of flannel, not an inch, my dear, and he is clothed in it from his chin to his toes."

"Oh," she said concisely.

"You see the world turns round so quickly now, and the wear and tear is greater. I always feel that he is a long journey ahead of me, so I let him go his own way. We always did that, Janet and I, he's been a good lad, and your father—no, it was your uncle, my dear, he was very kind to him, and got him into Bruce and Co.'s long ago. I don't believe we should ever have thought of it, Janet and I, we are so much taken up with things."

"Tell me what you are taken up with?" Polly said gently.

"Oh, there are so many things, and we always have so much to talk over. I am busy now getting up the presentation to the vicar of St. Martin's, four miles off, and not in our parish; but that doesn't matter. I'm going to make a speech, my dear; but I don't know what I shall say yet."

"It must be very difficult to make a speech," Polly said.

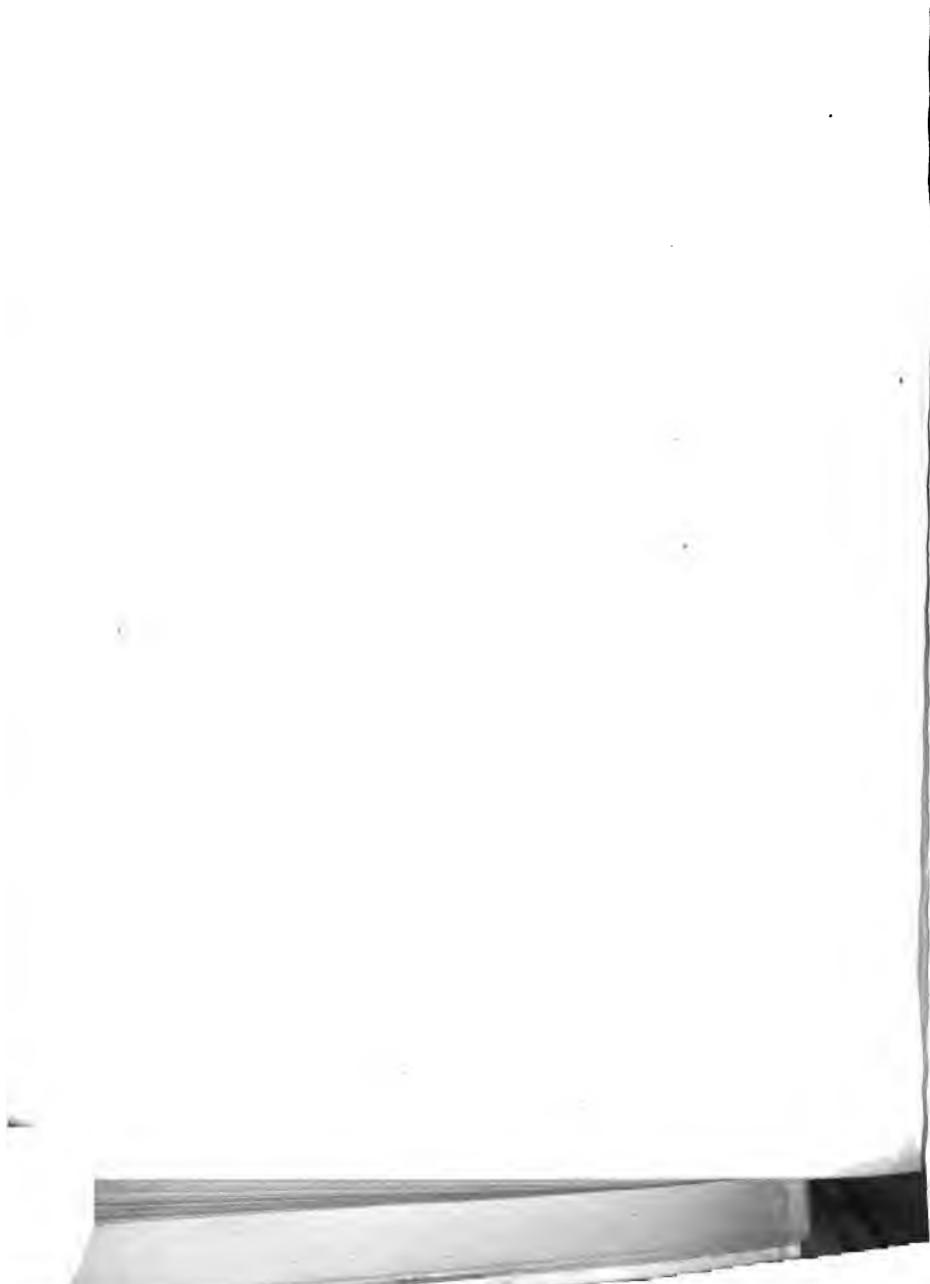
"No, not very, I have learnt the trick. I'll tell you about it—not now, we are nearly home." Then Polly looked out wonderingly in the damp chill twilight, and found that Farnham was not among woods and country lanes as she had imagined; but just a suburb, a good deal built over. Now and then she could see some misty spaces beyond the rows of smart new houses, and concluded they must be fields. She was disappointed, the country to her meant something more than fairly open spaces and rows of houses. They drove quickly along, and stopped at last before a pretty half-cottage, half-villa residence, standing alone. There was a garden on one side, that evidently stretched far behind. She got out of the fly, and went slowly up the flight of stone steps, and waited till Mr. Welch joined her, not venturing to knock. Suddenly the door was opened by a grave middle-aged servant, and close behind her stood an old lady in a soft lace cap, she was not more than sixty, perhaps; but she had the manner and softness of the traditional old lady, and one called her old endearingly rather than descriptively.

As she came forward, Polly saw her plainly by the light of the candle the servant held above her head, and felt thankful that this was Robert's aunt.

"What a long time you have been," she said, softly and cheerily, "and how tired you must be. Come in, dear, and sit down. David and Harriet will see to everything." And then the servant, who was evidently the Harriet referred to, gave her a friendly nod, showing



"SHE GOT OUT OF THE FLY" (p. 332).



that she had been in the family for years, and considered it her own, and said—

"We'll see to it. Go into the parlour, miss ;" and Polly went into the dining-room, which was always called the front parlour, and sat down by the fire.

"She must be very tired, David," Mrs. Welch said, when her husband entered ; "she must rest after dinner." The cloth was laid, and a meal was evidently at hand. "Now let me look at you," and she took off Polly's little crape bonnet, and all the wraps she had gradually accumulated round her on the journey, and put them down on the sofa, and took a long look at her, and then with almost a sob in her throat, she stooped and kissed her, which she had not done before, and put her arm round Polly's shoulders, and drew her to her for a moment. "Poor thing!" she said, "you have had a world of suffering, but you have come home now ;" and Polly's heart rose up to her lips, and swiftly her thoughts went back to the dingy house, and to those that were at rest, and to all that had been, and hating and loathing herself, and yet grateful before all things for the kindness shown her, she vowed inwardly she would be everything she possibly could to Robert. She made no answer, but the tears rolled slowly down her cheeks. "Never mind, dear, never mind," Mrs. Welch said, "You'll soon be happy and well again. I will show Polly her room, and David, you ring the bell for dinner." But the old man forgot to do so till Polly came down ready for the meal.

And then there was a clatter of some one coming upstairs with plates and dishes. All the rooms seemed near together, and all the sounds in that house ran one into the other, and Harriet brought in the dinner, and in a minute Polly was seated at table, with Mr. Welch and Mrs. Welch at either end. It seemed like a dream, and yet like one of which she had been told before, and which somehow must be true.

They did not talk to her much, they never talked much to any but each other. Polly soon learnt that though

their faces, turned often to look at her, showed that they remembered her presence. It was wonderful how much they were alike in some ways, and how happy they were—a happiness that always seemed born of the knowledge that they were together, more than of anything else. They had the same half-dreamy expression at times, generally a bright expression, as if they were thinking of things pleasant to remember, the same kind eyes and voices, the same simplicity of manner, in which there was now and then a touch of something that was almost pathos, but oftener a sense of innocent humour, and quiet unaffected enjoyment of life. Mrs. Welch had evidently the stronger mind of the two, and her husband gave way to it, and deferred to it in most things, but if she ruled him it was done so gently and pleasantly, he never knew it, and she herself was utterly unconscious of her power and thought; all she did, originated with him, and so she gave him the praise and blame of all that came about; but the blame was smiling, and gentle, and almost as sweet as the praise. There were two things Polly wondered at greatly, long before the first week of her residence with them was over. How they could ever have lived in busy Liverpool, and where Robert, staying with these simple, dreamy, almost poetic people, had learnt his brisk, business-like, matter-of-fact manner.

She soon understood. All their lives they had lived so much in each other, and in their own hearts, that they had almost forgotten Robert. He was dear enough to them. They would have done anything for him, though anything practical would certainly have had to be suggested to them; but he lived outside their world, and they never tried to take him into it. When he came to them as a boy, they had made a pleasant room for him, they gave him kind words, and pocket-money in plenty, and left him to go his own way. After a time it was suggested he ought to go to a school, and he was sent to one where he made friends with boys who were meant to make their way in the mercantile world, and he made

them to a certain extent his models. When he came home, he found his uncle and aunt always kind and thoughtful, anxious about his creature comforts, and ready as far as they could to give him anything in their power. But there was no companionship for him, and so he grew up, as it were, on his own account, adapting himself to school and office life, making himself in turn as much like his school-fellows and fellow clerks as possible. One thing had told against him as a boy, he had been delicate, and apt to coddle himself, and to abstain from the games and exercises in which he might otherwise have taken part, so that he had fewer close friends now than most young men, though he had many acquaintances. And seeing only the outside of other's lives, and judging them by it, he grew up without any inner life of his own, or knowledge of one, beyond what had to be done to-day, and the business that in the ordinary course of things he might have to transact to-morrow. Even Polly, when she came into his life, came into it alone, bringing no train of thoughts, and sympathies, and interests ; she stood in his life just a central figure, to be won and taken care of, and given way to and married, and settled down with, and yet he loved her with all his heart, though without sentiment, or romance of any kind.

"She is very like what I expected," Mrs. Welch said.

"I knew her directly ; I said you would be amused," her husband answered.

"It seems so strange," Mrs. Welch said, with that bright inward smile of hers that showed she was thinking of far-off things, "to see Robert's sweetheart sitting down with us, I can't believe the boy is going to be married. I hope you'll live near us," she added, turning to Polly, "I have looked at so many houses already."

"Oh," Polly said simply, her heart sinking, for this sudden talk of houses, and opening out of the business of marriage seemed almost like the beginning of the ceremony to her unsophisticated ears.

"There are many pretty houses about here," she continued, "I often look at them as I pass, and wish you may come to live in one of them, I dare say they are nice inside."

"How does Robert get here from Liverpool?" Polly asked.

"There's a train, he comes by it every day. He gets home to dinner at half-past six, and then generally goes to his room—he has a little sitting-room of his own, you shall see it to-morrow—and lies down, he's tired after his day's work. He finds it dull here, too; in the summer he helped David in the garden, but now there's nothing to do of an evening."

"A little room built out behind the next room is his sitting-room," Mr. Welch said, "and up-stairs over this is the drawing-room. There's a piano there. She looks as if she could sing, Janet," he added.

"Yes, we must have a fire in the drawing-room to-morrow. We generally sit here of an evening when we are alone, it is less trouble, and it doesn't matter where one sits, but only of what one is thinking."

"You look as if you had pleasant things to think about," Polly said, wondering.

"So I have," she said gently and brightly, "so many pleasant things, and so many kind people to remember. I often think how good the world is. I never knew any one there was not something good in to remember, and one can forget all the rest, you know. There is so much sweetness in life and people to think about;" it was said rather to herself than to Polly, but the girl took in every word and treasured that speech in after-life, and learnt to think about the good, and to sun herself in it. It was thus that unconsciously Aunt Janet helped many an one, for people are often in a great measure what we expect them to be, and think the best means unconsciously to shame the worst out of them.

CHAPTER XII.

ROBERT AT HOME.



OLLY had been nearly three weeks at Liverpool, and Robert was expected home, and Polly hated herself for not longing to see him. She could not help thinking that he would seem out of harmony with the almost dream-like life his uncle and aunt led. They were very kind to her, they were sorely distressed about her health, for she was no stronger, and they made a greater companion of her than they had ever made of their nephew. She knew every nook and corner of the house well, and she walked up and down the garden with Mrs. Welch, or had a game of chess with Mr. Welch, and played to them both of an evening. She had not found courage to sing again yet, and indeed was hardly strong enough to attempt to do so. It seemed to the quiet old people, when she had been even only a little while with them, that this slender girl with her sweet face and gentle voice, was a part of their own lives, and could never have been a stranger. Her coming among them seemed like the coming home of some one, for whom unknowingly they had been waiting.

"I could never talk to any one else about our little Dennis," Mrs. Welch told Polly, alluding to the great sorrow of her life, the loss of her only child, "but I like to tell you about him, it makes me feel happier, and as if the child were near. Sometimes I think you must have known him, though he died long before you were born. Does it ever seem to you," she went on musingly, "difficult to believe that our souls have but just one human body to live in on earth, and that they see

heaven for the first time when all earthly life is over?"

"I don't understand," Polly said, gently.

"Don't you, dear," Mrs. Welch said more to herself then to her listener, it seemed. "Don't you sometimes think you have known, and seen many many more things than you can remember. I often do. That is why I feel as if you had known my little Dennis. You may have seen him in some other world, and if so, you have brought away some remembrance of him about you, that makes me happy when I talk to you."

But Polly said nothing, for she felt no affinity with the lost child, and yet could not mar his mother's dreamy idea.

"How many years is it since he died?" she asked..

"Oh, my dear!" Mrs. Welch answered with a long sigh, and yet the sweet smile, and the far-off look lingered on her face. "It is eight-and-thirty years ago, but he is a baby still to me. Do you know," she said suddenly, "there are so many children buried in the same place with him, I often think, when I go and look round at all the little graves, that perhaps heaven will be recruited with cherubs from there on the last day."

"Dear Aunt Janet," Polly said, stroking her hand. She had found it impossible to call her by her formal name.

That same evening brought Robert home. He had made every thing right in town. The dingy house was advertised to be let. Grant Stanmore was on his way home, and his daughter was in comfortable lodgings awaiting him. Robert was in excellent spirits, exultant at seeing Polly apparently settled down with his people, and very mysterious about something that was in his portmanteau and which he had meant to put into his pocket; but which Polly should see when his things were sent up from the station.

"Well Aunt," he asked, in the cheery voice that somehow always carried dismay to Polly's heart—"And what do you think of her? Isn't she just what I told you?" This was after dinner, when they were all in the

drawing-room, and after Robert had been walking round and round Polly, and looking at her from every possible point of view, feeling his heart full of love, seasoned perhaps with a little pride of ownership, for he felt that she was his now, or as good as his. Polly brightened up as much as she could, for it seemed cruel not to try and welcome Robert, and he was brimming over with happiness in consequence.

"Yes she is," his aunt answered; looking at Polly affectionately.

"We don't know yet whether we shall let you marry her, Robert," his uncle said, with a twinkle in his round dark eyes. "We like her with us so much. It is like having one's own youth back again to see you two about the place. I don't know what you want to get married for."

"No more do I," said Polly; "I think we do very well as we are."

"Oh, I don't think," Robert exclaimed, "I've told them at the office, too, that I'll live in Liverpool next year. So we shall have to get married early in the spring, please, Polly."

"But are we not going to live near here?" Polly asked, almost in dismay. "It would be so nice to be near Mr. and Mrs. Welch, it will be so lonely"—but she stopped.

"No, it can't be done, I fear, darling, for I have promised to be near the firm. But we'll be all right together, and think of lots of things to do."

"This place seems quite like home now—" Polly began.

"It will be all right, my dear," Mrs. Welch said. "You'll find it home where he is; a woman's home is with her husband, and in no fixed place or house." But Polly could not answer for a choking sensation in her throat. "David took me away when we were married," Mrs. Welch added.

"Did you like each other very much?" Polly asked, guiltily.

"Yes, dear, we did; we did from the very beginning, didn't we, David?"

"Ah, that we did," he answered ; for the presence of these two young people, lovers he imagined as he and his wife had been lovers, made him feel strangely sentimental.

"That we did. Do you remember where I saw you first, Janet ? I had been for a long tramp in the country," he said, turning to Polly, "with her cousin, and suddenly he remembered that he'd some relations living near, and took me in to call on them. It was evening, and we had been walking all day, and were tired and dusty. We were shown into a drawing-room, and presently she came in. She'd such pretty brown hair. She was a pretty girl, I never saw one like her. I remember she wore a cool' muslin gown ; it looked almost white. I heard her coming along the passage, and she opened the door and came in, and when I looked up and saw her face, I loved her in a minute."

There was something misty in his wife's eyes as she said quietly,

"How foolish you are, David. These children make you quite foolish."

"I say, uncle, how is the presentation to the vicar of St. Martin's getting on ?" Robert asked. "Is it to take place to-morrow ?"

"Yes ; it's to take place to-morrow," Mr. Welch answered. "Janet and I are going over in the afternoon, and we are to stay and dine at the vicarage. The doctor says Polly must not go out at night, while this cold is on her, nor until she's stronger ; so she can't go. But she has heard my speech. She has been helping me with it."

"You and Polly will have dinner all alone together, and an evening to yourselves," Mrs. Welch said. "How pleased you'll be."

"Shall we really ?" Robert exclaimed. "Oh, Polly, won't it be nice ?"

"You haven't asked me about my speech," his uncle said, reproachfully.

"How is it getting on ; and what's it about ?"

"I don't know what it will be about, because I

change my mind so often," Mr. Welch answered; "but it's getting on. I asked the vicar what he did when he first preached, and felt nervous, and he said he always preached to one person, whom he picked out in the congregation, and imagined that person to be only a cabbage-stalk; so when I make my speech to the vicar, I shall try to think that he is only a cabbage-stalk."

"And Polly and I will be enjoying ourselves at home, while you are speechifying. I shall come home early to-morrow," Robert said, exultingly.

"There are three things necessary to make a good speaker," the old man went on: "A sense of humour, some power of original thought, and a little recklessness. Now I was always a little reckless, wasn't I, Janet?"

"Yes, David, always," she answered.

"Oh, there's a ring at the bell. It's my portmanteau from the station, I know," Robert exclaimed. "Polly, come to my little sitting-room, and have a talk," he said, springing forward.

"You must have so much to say," Mrs. Welch remarked, encouragingly. "You'd better go, dear. Pull your shawl round you;" and so, loth enough, and yet determined to do her duty, Polly got up; but when Robert saw how pale she looked he gave up the happiness of a *tete-à-tete*.

"Oh, I think we'd better stay here after all," he said. "We don't mind aunt and uncle, you know;" and then he rushed downstairs, and presently returned with something in his hand. "Look here, Polly," he said, "Here is a present I've brought you back from London. It is a ring; we are engaged, and you ought to have one, you know." But something made Polly shrink away.

"Oh no, Robert, please—please don't," she pleaded. "I shall feel fettered," and then they stood looking at each other a minute, almost aghast.

"You will love your fettters if you love Robert," Mrs. Welch said, simply. "I have often kissed my wedding-ring because it is a fetter, and binds me to

David. You ought not to mind wearing Robert's ring if you are going to be his wife." Polly stood still, blankly looking at them all for a moment, and then she longed to tell them what an impostor she was, and how mean and cold-hearted, and to beg them to kill her on the spot, or do anything dreadful they pleased to her. There was nothing that would not be sweeter than marrying any one in the wide world.

"I thought you'd like it, Polly," Robert said gently enough, but with dismay on his face. "You used to be so fond of pretty things, you and Mrs. Dawson; don't you remember?"

"Yes, of course," she answered gently, her heart beating at the sound of her mother's name. Of course I ought to like a fetter, and I'll wear anything you like," she said, and held out her hand, and Robert put the ring on her finger, and looked at her lovingly.

"I've got something else for you, too, darling," he said, "and I know you'll like that. It's a book. Its Shakespeare. There; you like that, don't you?"

"Yes, dear Robert," she answered, gratefully. "How good you are. You are much too good for me. We'll read him together, will we not?" and she sat down with the book on her lap.

"Well, we'll see about that," he said, in his most cheery voice; for he was glad she liked it, and he watched her turning over the leaves with as much pleasure as a mother watches a child handle a rag-doll. "I don't much care about reading plays, there's such a lot of talking in them."

"Why, of course," she laughed, "they're all talking."

"He'd a lot of ideas," Robert said, thinking to please Polly by talking about the poet she seemed to like so much, and trying to be a good impartial critic. "They must have been an awful bother to him. Wonder what made him think of them all."

"He didn't think of them, they came to him naturally somehow, he was a great genius."

"Well, I'm glad I am not a great genius, with a lot

of ideas dodging about in my head, whether I like it or not. It would be such a bother putting them all down." And then he sat, and looked at Polly. She was his idea, he thought, and she was quite enough. All his life was summed up in her, his history, if it were ever written, would be simply that he did his work steadily, was good-tempered, and loved Polly, and he didn't want any other history. She, turning over the leaves came to the lines :—

"Oh two such silver currents, when they join,
Do glorify the banks that bound them in."

and pondered over them. She remembered seeing them once on the top of a love-story, and she began half unconsciously to try how she could weave them into her own life. They could not mean herself and Robert, she thought, and straightway her thoughts went off to Benthwaite. They would just apply to Richard Bradford and Clare, and she wondered what they were doing. Probably they were sitting after dinner in their own drawing-room. There would be a lamp burning with a shade over it, for she remembered Dick telling her once that he liked shaded light, and detested gas, perhaps Dick was reading, or perhaps he was walking up and down the room, as he had a habit of doing, and Clare might be walking up and down with him, with her arm through his, and looking very pretty—far prettier than she had ever looked, and Dick would turn round now and then in the midst of his thinking or speaking, and take one swift look at his wife's face, just as he used to make Polly's heart beat quicker by looking at her in the old days, when they sometimes strolled along some quiet road together. Then she looked up at Robert, and suddenly coming back to realities, put out her hand, the hand with his ring on the third finger.

"You are very good to me, Robert," she said ; and she turned towards his uncle and aunt, and looked at them, and said what she had to say gravely and sweetly,

and from the bottom of her heart, and they remembered her words, and were softened, when those days came, in which they found it hard to forgive her. "He has always been good to me," she said, "better and truer, and kinder than any one else has ever been, and I am not half good enough for him. I never shall be, not if I live to be an hundred."

"Oh Polly, my darling——" Robert exclaimed, amazed at this sudden testimony to his virtues, and ashamed at being praised before his uncle and aunt; but something in her face stopped him, and prevented him from saying more.

"My dear, my dear," Mrs. Welch said softly. "It makes me very thankful to hear you, and to know you love him so. How happy you will be together, you will be just as happy as we have been." But to this Polly made no answer, and a stillness seemed to fall on them all, and then Robert began to whistle very gently; but stopped himself instantly.

"Oh, I say, don't let us all go on getting sentimental," he said, "it makes one feel like a fool."

"Let us look at Shakspeare again," Polly said; but in half-an-hour she gave it up. "Do you know, aunt Janet," she said; "it is nearly ten, and though it seems unkind to go so soon the first night Robert is at home, I am very tired, and my head aches, I shall be better to-morrow; may I go now?"

"Of course you shall, my dear," the old lady said, and she went upstairs with Polly, and lingered with her, helping her as if she were her own daughter.

"Auntie, I want to ask you whose child that is," Polly said, half fearing to put the question, and pointing to the portrait of a pink and white baby enclosed in an old-fashioned ebony frame, that hung over the fire-place in her room. She had not noticed it there before.

"It is another portrait of Dennis, our little one that died. I had it put up there to-day," Mrs. Welch answered gravely. "I always think he has such an angelic little face," she went on. "Heaven must

have seemed like mother-country to him." It was a fat baby, with very fat arms, and short fat legs, all duly displayed. Polly did long to feel sympathetic and awe-struck, and was sorely grieved to find herself thinking it rather a common-place baby. But the mother stood before it with the most reverent expression on her almost beautiful face. Polly could not help thinking how dear and lovable she was. Suddenly she turned to Polly, and putting her face down, kissed her tenderly.

"My dear, I do hope some day to see little children about you and Robert," she said, simply.

"Oh," said Polly, with a start, the colour rushing to her face. Motherhood was a catastrophe that had never entered into her imagination at all.

"However much one may love one's husband before," Mrs. Welch went on, dreamily, as was her wont, "the first little pair of arms that goes round one's neck, makes one love him ten times more. It is the most wonderful thing, that first seeing one's own child."

"Oh," said Polly.

"But you are tired, my dear," Mrs. Welch said, suddenly remembering Polly's headache. "Good-bye, dear; sleep well. You will have such a happy day to-morrow, you and Robert. How glad you will be to get rid of me and uncle David."

"Oh, no, aunt—"

"Yes you will, dear;" and she laughed softly, "of course you will. As if I didn't remember my own youth, and understand yours. I think my age is like my beauty used to be, only skin deep, for my heart feels so young when I see you two together. Well, dear, good night, and may you wake up quite well in the morning."

"I am sure I shall go mad," Polly said sadly to herself when she was alone at last; "I am quite sure I shall go mad."

CHAPTER VIII.

THE LITTLE DINNER.



OLLY was a good deal better the next day, though her cold still hung about her. Mr. Welch was very busy with his speech all the morning, but went off to St. Martin's still undecided as to what he would actually say. However, he told Polly that, when it was once over, he would go on repeating it again and again to himself, in order that he might remember every word of it to tell her. A little basket of late roses came just before they started, and Mrs. Welch put one in her dress, and one in her husband's coat, and gave the rest to Polly.

"Of course you will want to look nice for him this evening," she said. "What a happy time you will have together;" and Polly, looking at her ring, and thinking of yesterday, felt that there was no hope for her, and all she could do was to try and make the best of things. And after Mr. and Mrs. Welch went she had a little sleep, so that she might not be tired for the evening to which Robert had looked exultingly forward in the morning, and when the twilight came she set about getting ready for him. She saw that the fire was bright in the drawing-room, and the cloth laid nicely downstairs, she put some roses on the table and one in her hair, and tried to look her best, and then all was ready, and she stood by the parlour fire, looking at the preparation for their little feast. It would be just like this when they were married, she thought. Here she was waiting for him, as she would probably wait then, and everything was ready except herself, and she would never be ready at heart as long as she lived. How she hated herself

for not loving him dearly, and how she resolved that she would be very good to him, as she had resolved five hundred times before.

She heard Robert's footstep ; she knew it well enough. He ran up the steps blithely and quickly, let himself in with a latch-key, and hung up his hat in the hall, whistling all the time, while she listened keenly and curiously. Then he looked in on the chance of Polly's being in the parlour, and, seeing her, burst in, thin and swallow, with his coat, as usual, a size too large for him, his arms looking unnaturally long, and his kind, bony face, lighted up with good humour and satisfaction. "Oh, Polly!" he exclaimed, "Have the old folks really gone? How nice you look;" and he rushed forward, and she tried not to feel like a martyr, and to think that it was all quite right and natural, and she ought to submit, and she would. "Oh, Polly!" he went on, in a tone of rapture, "look at the cloth laid just for us two. Doesn't it make you think—?"

"Yes, Robert," she said, dutifully. "You had better go and wash your hands," she added, in the practical manner that seldom failed her when she was with Robert.

"All right, darling ;" but he lingered by the door, still looking with satisfaction at the dinner table. "I know what I'll do," he said, in the tone of one to whom a brilliant idea had suddenly occurred ; "I'll put our two places close together. You shall sit here just round this corner ;" and taking up the knife and fork that had been laid at the opposite end for Polly, he proceeded to place them. "And I'll move the table-spoons and salt-cellar, and then we can spoon between the courses."

"No, you mustn't," she said, desperately. "Do leave the things alone. What would Harriet think?"

"Very well," he said, reluctantly putting the things back into their former places. "Perhaps it looks better to sit properly one at each end. It's more like master and missis, too, isn't it?"

"Yes." Then he went upstairs, and returned looking very much brushed up, just as dinner **was being** brought in.

"Polly, let me hand you to your place," he said, with a ring of happiness in his voice it did **her** good to hear, in spite of her reluctant heart. They sat down, and Robert carved the chicken, and did it **very badly**, and told Harriet she need not wait, and got up and helped Polly to some sauce, and sat down again, all the time looking supremely blessed.

"Isn't it nice?" he said presently. "It's just like being married. A little more gravy, Mrs. Robert Welch?"

"No, thank you," she said, demurely, trying to fall in with his humour, for she did like to see him happy, and would have given anything to make him so, and while he kept at a very respectful distance, she always got on better. At the present moment the length of the dining-table was a source of distinct satisfaction to her.

"Now you shall help the pudding," he said, when it appeared. "That's how it should be, you know, **the** master helps the meat, the missis helps the pudding. Wouldn't it be nice if they went out every day, darling?"

"Yes," she said doubtfully, feeling like a deliberate and hopeless story-teller; but still, he was safely stationed at the other end of the table, and the consequence of her untruth could not fall on her immediately, so, like Mr. Welch, she was a little reckless.

"Now then," said Robert, in a hearty tone, when the dinner was over, "now we'll go upstairs, and **sit** over the fire—let me give you an arm, Miss Dawson, and we'll have a nice long talk together."

"Yes, Robert," she said, and she thought—"I have to do it all my life long. I may as well begin." They went up into the drawing-room, and sat silently for a few moments, one on each side of the fireplace, a convenient little table still separating them.

"Don't you think we might sit a little nearer?"

he said, not quite sure of the success of the arrangement he had himself proposed.

“Ob no, it’s so nice like this,” she answered.

“Like Darby and Joan, eh?”

“Yes.”

“Oh, well, all right;” and they were silent again for a few minutes, while she searched about in her mind for something to say.

“Robert, can you swim?” she asked suddenly.

“Yes, of course I can. I say, can you swim, Polly?”

“No, I should like to know how.”

“All right. You shall. I’ll see about it to-morrow.”

“Oh no, dear Robert. I’m not strong enough. I don’t feel as if I could set about learning anything yet, especially anything that wanted exertion;” and she looked up, and he saw uneasily, as he had seen many a time lately, how thin and pale her face had grown.

“Very well,” he answered. “You shall learn by-and-bye. I wish we were going to be married to-morrow, and going in the country, then you’d soon get fat and well. Why can’t we, Polly?”

“Oh no, Robert, I can’t—why it is only six weeks since poor papa died, you know, and—I can’t,”—and she nearly broke down,—“and—and—I promised Aunt Maria to go and stay at Benthwaite first, you know.”

“Suppose we went there for a honeymoon?” It made her heart stand still. Benthwaite, of all places in the world!

“Oh no,” she gasped.

“Very well, dear, of course you know best,” another long silence.

“I say, Polly,” he said gently, “do you remember how you used to sit on the rug at Kensington? I always think of you sitting on the rug, and looking up at Jack, and talking to him. I used to be desperately in love with the top of your head.”

“How can you be so ridiculous, Robert?”

“Come and sit on the rug at my feet,” he said,

in a coaxing tone; "and look up at me, just once, you know."

"Oh Robert, dear, I can't. I can't indeed, it makes me think—"

"Very well." Another long, long silence. Polly's head was aching. It was no use, she was not well. She felt convinced she was fast getting ill. She would have given the world to creep off to bed, but she knew it would look unkind, and she could not be unkind to Robert. Besides, in spite of the long pauses, he was looking very content and happy, and she liked to see him happy. She tried to think of something to say in which he would be interested, and wondered why it was, she and Robert never could find things to say to each other. Then, while she was wondering this, and why it was one could not always love best the people one knew to be best, Robert looked up, and said vigorously—

"I say, what *shall* we talk about?" Then she remembered the party at the studio, and the happy thought struck her that Robert might be amused at an account of it. He was not much interested, but he was always glad to hear Polly talk, and pleased to see her look animated. It almost puzzled him to see how eagerly she talked of this party, and told him all about what seemed a very stupid affair indeed.

"And you know, Robert," she went on, "it was so funny to see all the people who were there, and you could not tell what they were there for, for the only amusement was standing up in a crowd, and the people were packed so tightly they were just like so many sardines in a box standing on their tails."

"I should have liked that if you had been there. I should like to be a sardine in a box with you, Polly."

"Oh, nonsense, Robert, you'd be covered with oil, and flavoured with spice, and you wouldn't know anything about it;" and she laughed a little, and Robert listened gratefully to the sound of her laughter.

"Well, go on," he said.

"Well, and then there was a Sir William Robertson,

and he makes very long, dull speeches, and is the greatest talker and the greatest bore possible, and Margaret Albury said that he had talked his way into Parliament, and he had talked so long in the House that now it had come to be looked upon as his established right, so nobody ever tried to stop him when he got up, and nobody ever thought of listening. I can't think why his constituents send him to Parliament if he's such a bore, can you?"

"Depend upon it, that's the reason why they do it. They want to get rid of him down at his place, or wherever it is he stands for, and they shut him up in Parliament so that he may do his talking there."

"Perhaps it is," she laughed again; the evening was getting on a little better. "Robert, what are you in politics, are you a Liberal or a Conservative?"

"I'm sure I don't know. I'll be which ever you like, Polly."

"Oh, but Robert, you must take an interest in one side or the other. Don't you know which side you like to be in to govern the country, the Conservatives or the Liberals?"

"No; I don't care a bit, it does very well as it is, you know, first one side and then the other, turn and turn about. It don't much matter to any one but themselves which side is in, the country gets along all right."

"But I wish you would take an interest in things, Robert. You know if," she could not say when, "we are married and have a house you'll have a vote, and you'll have to be a good citizen, and give your vote to the best side, because that is helping your country."

"All right," he said, rather amused at her views on public matters, it was so funny she should think about these things, he thought. "I'll be a good citizen, and help my country, and vote on which ever side you like. I say, Polly, *do* come and sit on the rug at my feet for five minutes."

"No, Robert, I'm too old, I can't; besides, people

who are going to be married don't sit on rugs." Polly was getting artful.

"Don't they?" he exclaimed, delighted at the way she excused herself. "Well, I never did. Oh, Polly, what a consequential little thing you are." And he made a rush forward.

"Pray don't, Robert; do sit down and let's talk seriously again."

"Very well," disappointedly, "go on about your Liberals and Conservatives. Can't think where you get it all from. Let's see; what is the difference between them? One taxes things, but raises one's wages in order that one may be able to pay for them; and the other takes the taxes off, but lowers the wages, so that one mayn't be troubled with too much spare cash; isn't that it? and one thinks no one is as good as himself, and the other thinks nobody's better, that's about it, isn't it?"

"Robert," she laughed, for there was something quite hopeful in hearing him talk at all about anything, "you are an old idiot, but you are really getting brilliant."

"Am I?" he exclaimed, in a tone of rapture, "that's you, you know. Oh, what shall I be when I've got you always? Won't it be nice to have a whole lot of evenings like this?" But Polly's head throbbed so much she could not answer, and things were beginning to swim a little, and there were pains in all her limbs. She must have caught another cold, she thought.

"My head is so very bad," she said, "I fear I can't talk much more."

"Can't you dear, I'm so sorry. Look here, can I do anything for you?" Then a really brilliant idea occurred to him. "Would you like me to read to you, Polly?"

"Oh, yes, Robert, it would be so nice," she exclaimed gratefully; catching at the offer eagerly.

"Very well, I'll go and look among the books, there's a whole row of them in the next room, you know,

perhaps there's some poetry ; you'll like poetry best, won't you ? ”

“ Yes please, Robert,” she said. “ Shall we read some Shakespeare ? ” she asked.

“ Oh, no, I can't read plays,” he answered ; and went off to see what he could find.

It really would be nice to sit quietly, and listen while he read, she thought, and she poked the fire and turned up the lamp. Presently he came back with a little green book in his hand.

“ Do you know there were only three books of poetry there—Wordsworth, and he seemed so long-winded— ”

“ I've got Wordsworth up-stairs.”

“ And Scott ; but he is all about battles, you know, and I thought that wouldn't do for a girl.”

“ I like Scott. I know a great deal of him by heart.”

“ Oh, Polly ! ” he exclaimed, in a tone of greater rapture than ever, “ you know everything. I shall have the sweetest, darlingest, cleverest little wife ”—

“ Tell me what you have brought to read.”

“ Jean Ingelow's poems, they seemed all about birds, and sweethearts, and flowers, and that kind of thing, and I thought you'd like it.”

“ Oh, I should. I think I'll lie down, if you don't mind ; I am very tired. Now, Robert, begin ; it will be so nice to hear you read.”

Then Robert sat down, and drew the light nearer, and opened the book, and cleared his throat, and then he remembered he had not made Polly comfortable, so he went and shook up the pillow, and asked her if she would like another, and looked at her tenderly, and was repaid by a grateful touch of her hand, for her head was very bad, and then he sat down, and settled his chair, and cleared his throat again, and opened the book once more.

“ Here's one, ‘ Sailing beyond Seas.’ I don't know what it's about. Shall I read it ? ”

“ Please, Robert ; ” and then in a good, loud, sing-song voice, that contained in it a very distinct

remembrance of church on Sunday, he began, and read on to the end. At first Polly was almost inclined to laugh, for Robert looked like a young man competing before his time for the office of parish clerk, and his voice was just in keeping; but after the first four lines her thoughts went far away, and she forgot Robert and the book, and everything in the world but a walk across the fields, and a sweet spring morning only a little while ago.

"Daresay it's very nice," said Robert, when he got to the end. "But I don't understand it. Shall I read another?"

"Yes, please, Robert," the gentle voice said again.

"Here's one; its rather a long thing, though. It's called 'Divided.' Shall I read that?"

"Please, Robert;" and he mouthed away bravely at the sweet-flowing words, while Polly's heart beat quicker and quicker. It was just like Dick and herself, she thought. That first morning when she passed him with Clare Clayton, and he did not see her, was the first thread between them, that widened and widened as time went on.

"I say, do you like it?" Robert asked, when he got half through.

"Oh, yes, do go on!"

"Very well; but I think they were two idiots, you know, throwing away their chances like that;" and he went on again until he came to the last four verses. "Fancy a whole river getting between them. That fellow wasn't half a man though, and couldn't have cared much. I'd have swam across if I couldn't have got to her any other way."

"Oh, do go on, Robert, and don't say anything more till you get to the end," Polly said in a low voice, so full of pain, that he dimly felt she was in a land of dreams he did not know, and went on to the end.

"Well," he said, when it was finished, "it's a pity these two people didn't go over the bridge and meet in the middle, and walk on together arm-in-arm, then one

of them would not go writing poems about the other. Why, darling, whatever are you crying for?"

"Oh, its nothing, Robert, it's nothing;" and she turned her face down to the pillow, and tried to check her sobs, and thought her heart would break.

"But, Polly, you were surely not crying because of that stupid poem?"

"I'm afraid I was, Robert."

"But it isn't true!" How Robert's words went home to her.

"No, dear Robert," she said, sadly, "it isn't true."

"And I can't think how you can cry about a thing that isn't," he said, in astonishment. "I never do."

"You see I have had so much sorrow lately, and—and—I'm not well, you know."

"Oh, well, I can understand that; but I can't understand crying just because so many words are strung together all about a thing that never was. Just when we were being so happy too;" and his face was puzzled and disappointed, for he thought the reading aloud was going to be a brilliant success—and now it had failed.

"Oh, Robert, dear Robert, don't be angry with me," and she put up her hands pleadingly to him. "I can't help it. I'm so unstrung. I will try to be good to you all my life long; I will indeed." And he took the hands that were always white, and had lately grown so thin, and covered them with kisses, and said with a long sigh, as if his honest heart would burst—

"I *am* so fond of you, Polly, and it does not matter whether you are good or bad to me, if I've only got you, my darling."

CHAPTER IX.

THE COMING OF THE SPRING.



HE day after that little dinner with Robert, Polly kept her bed; her cold was worse, much worse, her head ached, and the light flashed before her eyes. Gradually the inevitable illness came. It was a cold she had taken, Mrs. Welch said, blaming, as people will, the last straw when the load has broken the camel's back; for of course it was the long, long strain that had told upon her. For weeks her life hung upon a thread. Brain fever set in, and she knew no one, and nothing of what went on around her; and when at last she opened her eyes, and looked up, she saw first, and remembered always the portrait of little Dennis over the fireplace, and then turning, found that Margaret Albury was sitting by her bedside.

"Margaret," she said; "what does it mean?"

"Go to sleep, dear child, that is what it means," Margaret answered. Polly often wondered where Margaret found the soft voice with which she used to speak to her in those days.

"But tell me where I am; and is that child really dead?"

"Yes, I believe he is; and you are here at Liverpool with Mr. and Mrs. Welch."

"And why are you here?"

"Robert telegraphed for me when you were taken ill."

"Have I been very ill?"

"Yes, very, very ill indeed. Now you must go to

sleep ;" and Polly, too weak to disobey, tried to do as she was told ; but she looked up again in a few minutes.

" Margaret, tell me who is walking up and down the garden. I can hear some footsteps going to and fro."

" It is Robert."

" Dear old Robert. Are there any sunflowers in the garden ?"

" Sunflowers ? Why, no !"

" I never had my Clytie after all, Margaret."

" What Clytie ?"

" Oh, I forgot you did not know about it," Polly answered, wearily. " It always makes me think—Why are there no sunflowers ? Uncle David said there were some."

" Not in January. Why, there has been snow. It is winter-time !"

" I thought it was very cold. Poor dear old Robert ! I ought to die, Margaret."

" No doubt it would be vastly interesting ; but as it is you are getting better again. Now go to sleep, please ;" and in a few minutes she dozed off again.

Polly slowly mended from that day ; but it was a long time before she was allowed to get up, long before she could do more than lie still on the sofa before the bedroom fire, and have little drowsy talks with Margaret Albury. What most astonished her was Robert's manner. He was no longer the confident, happy lover, with protestations always ready, and marriage the constant theme of his conversation. He was grave, and quiet, and gentle, always kind, and anxious to please, and yet he seemed no longer eager to spend every moment in her company, as heretofore, but in the evenings would shut himself up in his own little room, or walk up and down, up and down the hard, frosty pathway in the garden. And Polly, grateful to him, and yet longing to see him happy, now caught herself thinking with a sense of relief, for which she hated herself, that perhaps he had changed his mind, and did not want to marry her, and then would resolve, in the

old fashion, that she would be good and loving to him all her life, forgetting and stifling all else to remember only how kind and true and unselfish he had been. Yet, in spite of all her desires to make Robert happy, she could not help her thoughts straying to her mother and Jack, and, though not so often, to her father, and thinking how blessed a thing it would be if she were with them.

"If I could only want to get well," she said one day to Margaret, "I believe it would have an excellent effect on my progress. But I can't long for life. I suppose it is difficult unless one is happy."

"Longing for life is generally instinctive, and does not depend on happiness," Margaret answered. "But it is the hardest lesson to learn," she went on, with a sigh, "that which follows the first finding out that the world is not just a big playground, where everything is arranged for our enjoyment."

"I know, I know," Polly said, sadly. "And I fear that I am very selfish, Margaret."

"No, dear, not selfish, only young, and longing for happiness, as we all long for it in our youth."

"I only long to die now."

"That will pass. When you once realise that you may be of some help and comfort to other people, all the more for your experience, you will find plenty of reasons for wishing to live. There are some sorrows that crush all life and hope out of one; even these we may gradually learn to bear without crying out, save in the silence of our own hearts," Margaret went on drearily. "I believe one would get used to being burnt alive if it went on long enough—so used, that is, that one could keep one's mouth shut. But there are other sorrows, dear, that do one a world of good, and long afterwards, in looking back, we can be thankful, not that they came, but that having come, we felt them so keenly; and for the love's sake, the love that sharpened the sorrow, we can try to be of some help and use. It is the best tribute we can pay to our dear ones; it helps

to keep them in our hearts, and to make our love for them immortal, in as far as all human action is." She seemed to be talking to herself rather than to Polly.

"And yet one is never satisfied," Polly said, longingly.

"Satisfied—no, never!" Margaret answered bitterly. "Even one's most unselfish actions are seldom satisfying. One generally finds out, too late, how much better they might have been done. But it is a good thing it is so; it helps one to go on, and on—but I am turning street preacher again," she said; and leaving off abruptly, she sat down by the fire, and stared long and silently at the dull red coals. Before she raised her head or spoke again, Mr. Welch was heard coming down the passage leading to Polly's room.

"Come in, Mr. Welch," Margaret said, getting up quickly, and in the tone of one that in thought had come with a bound from a long, long distance. "Come in; the patient is getting on, and glad to see you." Uncle David went up to the sofa and looked at Polly gravely and kindly, and then sat down beside her.

"And you really are getting well at last?" he asked.

"I think so," she answered sweetly. "I am sure I ought, after all the kindness that has been shown me."

"Poor thing, poor thing! I knew you were not strong, directly I saw you."

"But I was never ill in my life before; I am not naturally delicate."

"Ah, that is the worst of it; people who don't fritter themselves away in little illnesses, have always so much strength left for a really grand bout."

"Uncle David, you are talking nonsense," she said saucily.

"That is because you have been ill so long."

"Tell me about your speech—I never heard how it went off. It must be nearly two months ago now."

"It was a great success. I quite forgot now what I said; but I thought of the vicar the whole time as a

cabbage stalk, and was not at all nervous. I nearly told him he had been of great use in his garden, instead of in his parish, for many years past."

"And did they applaud very much when it was finished?"

"Oh, yes, my dear; and Mr. Miles, the curate, said he had had no idea that I was an orator; and they put my speech into the paper. I was quite surprised, when I read it, to find how many things I'd said without knowing it. But then, of course I was so taken up with thinking—"

"And now tell me about Robert," Polly said suddenly.

"Robert!" the old man exclaimed. "Oh, I don't know what has come to the lad. He has been very miserable about you. He has made up his mind that you are to go to Benthwaite, to get braced up, when you are strong enough for the journey."

"Oh."

"You know, he insisted on telegraphing for Miss Albury directly he knew how bad you were, and she has nursed you all through your illness. I don't know what we should have done but for her."

Then the old man, thinking that he had stayed long enough—for Polly was still very weak—went downstairs again, and Polly had a little doze.

"Margaret, have you heard anything lately about our house at Kensington?" she asked when she awoke.

"No."

"Have you heard anything of—of—Mrs. Dawson?"

"No, not since I saw her driving about in a victoria, looking prosperous and bad-tempered. I suppose Grant Stanmore has come back well off."

"Was she in mourning?"

"Oh, yes," Margaret answered in her old, sour voice; "in the very deepest—from top to toe. She looked like a living certificate of her husband's death."

"I wonder why that is?" Polly said. "It is not as if she had loved poor papa."

"People without the inward spiritual grace, often take refuge in the outward visible sign."

Before Polly could reply, Mrs. Welch entered to pay her morning visit.

"Well, my dear?" she said, in a questioning tone.

"Well, dear aunt Janet," Polly said, putting up her face, and the kind old lady stooped and kissed her lovingly.

"Have you and Robert had a quarrel?" she asked Polly.

"Quarrel? No."

"I wonder what is the matter. I suppose it is only that he longs to see you about again; but he has become so grave and preoccupied lately."

"Do you know," Polly said, raising herself, anxiously, "I have noticed it too. I wonder what is the matter. I shall be down-stairs to-morrow, so the doctor says, and I will try and cheer him up."

"It is always odd to me why people get low-spirited and unhappy without cause," Mrs. Welch said; "and Robert ought to be very happy now that you are getting well; but perhaps he is down-hearted, because you are going to Benthwaite."

"I won't go if Robert does not wish it," she answered.

"He does wish it, I know. He asked the doctor himself yesterday how soon you would be able to go, and was glad when he said he thought you might start in a fortnight. You won't stay long, will you, dear?"

"No, dear auntie; I will come back as soon as you like."

"I daresay Robert is right about your going. The change of air will do you good. You must come back in good spirits, and looking bright and well. It will cheer you to see your mother's sister, too; and then the spring is coming, one cannot help being happy in the spring, and nothing does one so much good as being happy. Do you love the spring very much, dear?"

she asked, with the smile on her lips, and the far-off look in her eyes that Polly knew well now, and knew to mean that, as if in a dream, aunt Janet was wandering on between the white and green hedges of May.

"Yes, dear auntie, I do," she answered; and as she said it, she could not help thinking that it seemed as if the sunshine of some spring of long ago had stayed behind for ever in aunt Janet's heart, and in these winter days found expression on her lips, and looked out at the world through the soft, kind eyes—eyes that would never be old, though they lived to a hundred years.

"One is so religious in the spring, too," the old lady said.

"But why in the spring in particular, aunt Janet?" Polly asked, surprised.

"Oh, I don't know why," she answered absently. "I suppose one ought to be the same all the year round; but in the spring, one's heart seems to wake up, and bestir itself so much more than at any other time. Mine does. I never go out on a bright morning of early spring, and hear the birds singing their wild fresh songs, and see the pale leaves, and the small soft flowers in the hedges, and the blossoms on the branches, and the sunshine everywhere, without feeling all my heart go out in thankfulness to the Power that makes the sun to shine, and the beautiful world to be. I am the most religious person in the world on a sweet spring morning," she added, with a long sigh.

CHAPTER X.

POLLY UNDERSTANDS MARGARET BETTER.



THE improvement in Polly's health was very gradual, but it was sure, and at last she moved about the little house, again, and took her place at table once more, and Margaret Albury talked of going home. Polly was sadly loth to lose her, for she loved the sallow face and dull-brown hair, and had learnt to think that no hands were more gentle than Margaret's thin and bony ones.

During her long illness Polly had thought over many things, and in the long, aching hours had learned to take a different view of some; and for this there were two reasons, Margaret Albury, and the quiet life that went on in Mr. and Mrs. Welch's quiet home. She did not, of course, know it, but until she visited Robert's relations she had never lived among really nice people, or people that were without any taint of worldliness, and the rest that the change of life brought to her was satisfying beyond all words. She found herself wishing dozens of times that she had been Robert's sister, and niece to the kind old people. She would have asked for nothing more in life. She sometimes thought that had she and Robert been going to stay with them always, life would be much pleasanter than it promised to be now. Her affection for Robert had steadily increased during these last months. She was always thinking how good and unselfish he was, and yet she could not bring herself to think of marrying him without a feeling almost of despair, for which she could never account. She hated herself for it, but she could not help it. She determined a hundred times that she would be a good and affectionate wife to Robert; but she

could not make herself look forward to the prospect of being his, without a feeling of fear and dread she could not help nor conquer.

"I wonder what it means," she thought. "No one could be kinder than Robert. If I had any will in the matter, I would think of being married to him with the greatest joy. I sit and think of him, and see how good he is, and love him for it, and yet my heart never seems to rise up when he comes, as it did for Dick; it would not, and will not if I try all my life long." She remembered some words she had heard a year ago. She had thought them very sentimental then, and hardly understood them. She understood them well enough now:—

"I made another garden, yea,
For my new love.
I left the dead rose where it lay,
And set the new above.
Why did the summer not begin?
Why did my heart not haste?
My old love came and walked therein,
And laid the garden waste."*

"It isn't that," she cried out, passionately, to herself. "I never think of him now; I would not be so wicked. And how ungrateful I am! Dear old Robert, there is nothing in the world I would not do for him." She went to the piano, and, sitting down, set the words she had been thinking of to some old tune running in her head, and sang them in a low, weak voice.

"A charming song, I must say," Margaret Albury said, looking up from her book in the corner, and speaking in what Polly used to call her most lemon-juice voice of ail. "I am glad you are taking up that kind of expression. It will give a beautiful sadness to your thoughts, which will be perfectly satisfactory to yourself, and won't in the least matter to any one else."

"I don't know what you mean, Margaret," Polly answered, indignantly. "You are very unkind to me."

"Am I?" Margaret did not seem in the least affected by the accusation.

* O'Shaugnessy.

"No, you are not!" Polly answered, feeling ashamed of her hastiness already. "You are very kind, You have been very, very kind to me, and I ought never to be angry with you, dear Margaret. It is a very kind and good world altogether, and I am much too wicked for it."

"Nonsense! But you are right in one thing; it is a kind and good world if one only looks at it with the right eyes. And people are much better than they get credit for being. The worst of it is, they are so likely to judge others and to be judged themselves according to their tempers or their manners, and not according to their natures. And, as a rule, I have found that people have better hearts than tempers."

"That is like you, Margaret," Polly laughed. "You are sweeter of heart than of speech."

"Dear Polly, I am nothing but a looker on at the play, as I have often said before. I always feel left out of the drama, and yet allowed to look on and make remarks."

"Tell me one thing truly," Polly said suddenly. "Do you think that I am right in going to Benthwaite now? You know I do long to be all that I ought at heart to Robert."

"And for that reason I think you had better go; though for most girls it would be better to stay away. But you are a terrible little dreamer and idealist, Polly; that is why I want you to go, lest all your life you should unconsciously cherish a dream and an ideal. I think you will unless you deliberately wake yourself up. I daresay you will come back, ready to see how unselfish and noble Robert is."

"I do indeed see that now."

"But he is not what Richard Brandford was to you, or is." It was the first time that Margaret had mentioned Richard Brandford's name for a long time to Polly, and she saw the colour rush to her face.

"I am not in love with—with Richard Brandford now. Why, he is married. I would not be so wicked."

"I know you would not. But he was an ideal to you

once, and in some fashion of your own you think him one still. Don't see how you manage it; but you do, I know. What I want you to do is to find out that the man you once loved is not the miracle you think him. Meet him and see him. I don't mean to say that you will find he has committed any crimes; but as a rule ideals, unless they are made of very pure gold, have a way of looking sadly tarnished when one sees them after the lapse of time, or after any great crisis in one's life. You will come back to Robert's heart, as a bird to its nest, at the end of a few months."

"I never could understand why you disliked Richard Brandford so much," Polly said presently.

"I don't dislike him, though I wish with all my heart that you had never seen him. I daresay, though, the discipline has been good for you. Polly," she asked, looking up suddenly, "did you ever know two men, strangers to each other, and yet something alike, so that the one always reminded you of the other, though of the two men one was much the better man?"

"I don't know; why?" she knew perfectly what Margaret was going to say.

"Because Charles Layton and Richard Brandford are alike in some way. I don't know how it is, but I always think of them as being the best and the worst of each other."

"Tell me about Mr. Layton."

"He is fine in a certain way; he is honest and truthful and straightforward. If you were in trouble, he would hold out a helping hand if he could, and yet he would not understand your trouble, and though sorry would not know how to feel for you, unless experience had taught him. He learns things slowly, and, as a rule, only from experience. If you offend him, he judges you by his own standard of right and wrong, and looks at your offence from his own point of view, obstinately refusing even to acknowledge any other. So that, if he gets one idea into his head, nothing gets it out again."

"He is not in the least like Richard Brandford."

"I should think Richard Brandford had a temper, and would sulk, and think it dignified."

"Had Mr. Layton a temper?"

"Oh, yes," Margaret answered with a long sigh. "He had indeed, and he could sulk and stand upon his dignity. He would quarrel with the friend of years for the fault of a moment. I knew a friend of his once, with whom he spent some of the happiest hours; and yet, no matter how happy they had been one day, for the least word said, or the least thing done on the next, he was ready to cut him for ever. And the friend, who liked him, used to beg him not to do so—like a fool. The merest acquaintance might have been relied on more surely than he, and yet he—he of all people in the world—afterwards accused that friend of not being staunch to others."

"Margaret," Polly asked, a light breaking in upon her, "were you the friend?" There was a silence for a few moments, and then the answer came slowly—

"Yes, dear, I was."

"Tell me about it."

"There is nothing to tell. We knew each other very well, and had since we were children, and he came a great deal to our house. My mother used to go abroad for a few months every year, and I was alone, as you were, Polly, and we became great friends. I had the truest friendship for him."

"And had he for you?"

"No, he had none for me. But for a time, and at times, he liked my society. He had little to do, and I was easy to get on with, and we had known each other for a long time, and liked some things in common; but he had no friendship for me. He would not have been such a fool as to try and cut me time after time, if he had had. I think he rather detested me, on the whole, and I don't wonder. He was quite welcome, I am sure; but he gave me credit for certain vulgar and commonplace aims and ends. That was rather hard, for I never had an aim or end in my life," she added,

raspingly. "Finally, we quarrelled. A good thing, wasn't it?"

"And did you never make it up?"

"No, never altogether. But long afterwards, when he had a chance, he accused me of not being a staunch friend, and of a few other equally pleasant traits of character. I never had any amiability to boast of, but I was not quite the mean wretch he was capable of thinking me. I hated him ever afterwards, and shall. It cost me a world of worry and pain," she added, miserably.

"Did he know it?"

"He had not the least idea, and never would have believed nor understood it. He only learns from experience, and can never understand a state of mind that has not at some time been his own. It is like his censure of George Frankland for being now and then spleeny, because, when buffeted by the world, he has once or twice paid it back accordingly, being too tender-hearted to vent his disappointments nearer home. Charles Layton has found the world a pleasant, prosperous place, and has only himself to fight for. He is never spleeny—why should he be? But he does not forgive in others a fault to which he himself has no temptation. If he could get experience all round in different emotions, he would understand and feel fast enough for others, and might become a great and fine character."

"Margaret, did you ever fall in love with any one?" Polly asked.

"No, dear, never. Neither did any one ever love me. I have thought sometimes how I could have worshipped just one person—man or woman—greater a thousand times in nature and intellect than myself; some one with whom I could have found rest and sympathy, and that companionship which has been to me the greatest of all earthly longings. But it is too late now; I have found a pathway, and must ever keep to it, and alone."

“Are you glad?”

“Glad! no. Bring what sorrow it may, there is no rest so great, no refuge so sure, as that which comes of good love given to a strong sweet nature, with which one is in keen sympathy. If it is between man and woman, then the man should be intellectually the greater. There is nothing like it. Life may not be spent together, and words and meetings may be few and far between; but it is for ever a haven in which all that is best in us finds birth and home. If it is between man and wife, it must make life sweet beyond all words; a perfect love and perfect confidence, so that nothing is misunderstood, nothing is doubted, and words are not needed everlastingly to explain——” But something in Polly’s face made Margaret stop. “Am I not a sentimental lunatic?” she asked, mockingly.

“No,” Polly answered.

“And now you know the history of my friendship with Mr. Layton,” Margaret said, taking up her book.

“Did you get companionship with him while you knew each other?”

“No; that is the odd part of it. We were always strangers in thought, and yet we had many kindred tastes; but our talk was the smallest talk, of outward things and trifles. I think I always had a vague idea that in some unsuspecting moment, I should suddenly come upon his soul, and sit down and talk with it; but I never did. Perhaps he hasn’t one,” she added, contemptuously.

“Why did you not get other friends?”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Polly; only a fool buys experience twice. I have gradually grown sour, you see, and enjoy saying disagreeable things. Besides, no ideal man or woman has ever shown the slightest inclination to care about me. I have outside interests now, and a good thing too. I took a sudden interest in politics, for one thing, not that I know one side of the House from the other, I daresay; but it has been

amusing to fancy myself a Radical. Radicalism is a refuge for all manner of people; for the lonely and longing, and the poor and struggling, as well as for the young men with superfluous energy."

" Margaret," Polly said presently, " I wish you cared about me, for I love you dearly."

" I do."

" But how ? "

" I care for you as if you were my own little sister, and I had none other," she answered, kneeling down beside the sofa, " that is why I spoke about Richard Brandford. I did not want your innocent name talked about, and hoped I might be in time to prevent him from making ducks and drakes of your foolish little heart. It is because I love you, dear child, that I preach at you and bully you so. Did you not hear what I said to you one night, my darling—that I thought sometimes that when your mother died she left me her heart to love you with ? "

CHAPTER XI.

POLLY GOES TO BENTHWAITE.

PT was not possible, putting all other things aside, for Polly to get easily out of her long-promised visit to Benthwaite, for Miss Wood had expected her for months past, and insisted on her coming previous to her marriage. So it was arranged that she should go in the first days of April, a fortnight after Margaret Albury had gone back to London. She was only just strong enough to stand the journey, and Robert—faithful, thoughtful Robert—would not let her go alone, but asked for a holiday so as to take her as far as Windermere, and see her into the Benthwaite coach. Polly was very delicate still, and Robert used to sit and look at her those last evenings before she left Liverpool with a strange, sad expression on his face, and once, when Polly looked up suddenly, he turned away quickly, and she fancied there were tears in his honest eyes. She was very sweet and gentle to him, more so than she had ever been before, and taxed herself needlessly, wondering if, without knowing it, she had pained him. One thing she could not understand ; he was a lover to her no more. Kind, and tender, and affectionate as a brother might be, as gentle as a mother with her sick child, ever ready to see her wants or wishes, to wait upon her, to listen to her voice, and to hang upon the words that fell from her lips, and yet her lover no longer. She asked him once if she had done anything to vex him, if anything were making him unhappy ; but he evaded the last question, and said simply, “No, Polly, you have

done nothing—you are only too good for me," and turned away.

The train for Windermere started from Liverpool at twelve, and at eleven the fly was ordered which was to take her to the station. Robert went up to Polly.

"Will you come and walk round the garden with me, Polly?" he asked; and she rose, pleased he had thought of it, and went directly. "You have never seen the sun-flowers," he said; "uncle used to make such a fuss about them last year."

"I shall see them when I come back," she said; but he made no answer.

"I'm going to work hard, when you are gone," he said. "Look here, Polly. You must think of me as working hard, and not caring for anything, you know."

"Yes, Robert," she answered, wondering.

"You mustn't be unhappy, you know; but just set to, and get well and strong. I should like to see the colour in your face again, darling."

"I will try and get it there by the time I come back."

"You'll always love aunt and uncle, won't you? They are a jolly old couple, you know."

"Of course I shall always love them. What makes you say this, Robert?"

"Wait till we are off," he said. "And I'll tell you. Look round the garden again, Polly. I'll always think of it now as it has been to-day, just us two walking round and round, where the sunflowers will be blooming away like anything soon. I hear the fly coming. Let's go in;" and then she said good-bye to Mr. and Mrs. Welch, the tears stealing down her cheeks, and a sob choking the words which she tried to thank them for all their kindness to her.

"Don't cry, my dear; you'll soon be back, and while you are away you must think of us often; and, of course, you will be always dreaming of Robert," Mrs. Welch said, while the luggage was being put on to the fly, "and dreams are so like reality that when we sit still we can

hardly tell which is waking and which is dreaming. David could never really be absent from me, not if he were a thousand miles away. If one is only sure, that is all, if one is only sure." Then together Robert and Polly started on their way.

They had nearly half an hour to wait at Liverpool. The fly had come before its time, or they had made a mistake in the hour. There was a little empty waiting-room at one end of the platform. They went in, and sat down on a bench on either side of the fire, for it was chilly, and the day was getting cheerless.

"Robert, tell me what is the matter now?" Polly said.

"Not now; wait till we are off."

"Yes, tell me now. We are alone, and can talk. There may be people in the train."

"It is—it is," he said slowly, "that we shall never have another walk together. That's why I wanted you to come round the garden."

"Why?" she asked, starting.

"Because—because," and he got up, and went and stood by her, looking down into her face, "I am going to ask you not to come back again." She looked up at him in astonishment, and saw a look of misery on his face which she had not thought it possible it could wear. "I'll tell you why, dear," and he sat down and drew her arm through his. "I know why you are going to marry me, Polly, because *I* love *you*. There was some one else—I found it all out when you were ill, dear." He did not tell her he knew also who it was (he had not seen the marriage in the paper). "The others did not understand, but I did;" then the reason of Robert's sending for Margaret Albury flashed across her mind, though she knew that no word concerning this had passed between Robert and Margaret. "You are quite free, Polly," he went on. "My poor darling," he said suddenly, looking down yearningly into her face, "why didn't you tell me the truth? Do you think I do not love you more than myself—your happiness more than my own?"

"Oh, Robert ! I don't——" but her lips could not say the words. "No one else cares for me, and I am fond of you, Robert ; I love you as if you were my brother,"— but she knew what a mockery the word was, and corrected herself, "as the best and kindest, and truest friend I have, and I am very grateful to you."

"I will be your true and kind friend still, my darling ; I will, as long as I live."

"And I will love you back as much as you ought to be loved, and try to be worthy of you. Robert, dear, I will indeed, if you will marry me," she said, pleadingly ; for she knew without any vanity, how dear she was to him.

He looked at her again ; it was a sore temptation, he loved her so much. "No," he answered ; "don't say that again, darling, or you will drive me mad. Go to Benthwaite, dear, and remember that you are quite free ; and if ever you are going to be married, write and tell me. I could not be sorry for your happiness."

"But, Robert," she cried, "you don't understand, there is no one else in the world I can marry, no one else who would marry me. I know—for it would be useless to deny it—that what you say is true. I have cared for some one else, but I don't now. I was very wicked to get engaged to you."

"It was my fault."

"No, it was mine, Robert, and I was not fit to be engaged to any one ; but I have been true to you, Robert, and I have tried——"

"I ought to have let you off, I know, but I couldn't do it."

"Dear Robert ! Let me make you as happy as I can," she said. "I must indeed be cold-hearted and ungrateful if I do not love you dearly as you wish to be loved in time, and I have no desire in the world but to make you happy."

Then Robert, sorely tempted, wavered ; but only for a minute, for all the weeks since Polly first was ill, he had been girding himself up for this task.

"Well, if ever a long time hence you are single, and can say with all your heart 'Come,' then I will gladly, my darling," he said slowly. "But I feel now it is impossible. We'll always be friends, Polly—very great friends," he said, repeating the words she had once said to him. "There's no reason to go saying 'good-bye for evermore,' and all that; no matter what happens to you, it'll always be a happy thing to see you."

"There is no one like you, Robert," she said, not knowing what to say. Then he got up, and, looking out of window, whistled softly to himself.

"I wouldn't tell you till we had started, because of aunt and uncle," he said. "I thought it would be better to tell them when you were off. Here's the train—come along, darling," he said, brisk and busy, though grave and sad.

It was a very strange journey they took together that day. They hardly spoke, but when Polly looked up once or twice at the face he so vainly tried to make cheerful, she was more nearly falling desperately in love with him than she ever had been in all her life.

When they reached Windermere at about seven in the evening, and stood waiting in the courtyard of the hotel for the coach which was to take Polly on to Benthwaite, Robert nearly broke down. "If ever, though it is ever such a long time hence, you *can* send for me, Polly—" He could not say more, but she understood him. Then they heard the creaking of the coach wheels in the distance.

"God bless you, dear Robert," Polly said. "There is no one in this world so good as you;" and taking his hands she kissed them humbly, while he longed to break down the barriers he had put between them, and just for one single instant to hold her to his heart, but he did not dare. He looked at her once more, but he could scarcely see the sweet face he loved so well, in the darkness which gathered round it. Then he helped, almost lifted her into the coach, and wrung her hands, and kissed her cheek as he might have kissed a sister's, but

still he could not speak. The coach moved, and he strained his eyes to take one last look at the face pressed against the window-pane, and stood still, almost dazed and stupefied, till the heavy lumbering vehicle was out of sight and hearing. He turned away then, and rushed off to catch the mail train, and went back to Liverpool—with all his life before him, and all his world behind.

Polly went on her way dazed, and half-wondering if she could be awake. She was free at last, and yet it gave her no pleasure, in spite of the sense, which she felt almost without knowing it, of a load fallen away. "I will never have any one else," she thought. "There is no one in the world like him. I will write to him in a little while and tell him so, and then I will lose every thought in life but just the desire to make him happy." And yet there came, through all the affection of which her thoughts were full for Robert, a sweetness in feeling she was free, for which she hated herself, and determined to chase out of her thoughts. It was quite dark before she drove into Bentwhaite. Just on the outskirts a fellow-passenger, talking to some one with her, pointed out the dim mountains almost wrapped in darkness, and the country seats scattered here and there, telling the names of their owners. "And that house up there on the brow is the 'Laurels,'" she said, suddenly; and with a wild throb at her heart, Polly started forward and looked out, and saw in the distance a white house half hidden by trees. It was too dark to make out its outline, but she could see the glimmer of light in the distant windows. Behind the windows and the drawn blinds Richard Brandford and his wife—she never thought of him without her—were sitting, she thought. "I'll write to Robert," she said to herself as she went on in the darkness, "and I will cure myself; it is only just a dream now, but I will wake from it, and be good to Robert—dear, kind Robert!"

CHAPTER XII.

MRS. RICHARD BRANDFORD.



THE beauty of Benthwaite broke upon Polly like a dream. She had not thought the world contained so lovely a place, and she remembered Clare Clayton's remark that it always seemed to her just a station short of heaven, and did not wonder. It was a little lake-land village, shut in by the mountains and bounded by a river that rushed over great stones, and wound around mountains, and crept on under grey stone bridges, and through broad green meadows, into the sea long miles away. At one end of the village, and a little way from it, there was a lake which a waterfall was for ever singing to sleep, and at the other end a long, low-roofed, picturesque church, in which, years ago, Polly's grandfather had preached, and Polly's mother had been married. It was all like fairy-land.

Miss Wood was very deaf, and silent, and self-contained, devoted to her cat and birds, and after the first series of questions left her niece a good deal to her own devices. So she wisely spent most of her time out of doors, happy enough in finding out for the first time how beautiful a place the green earth could be.

She wrote to Robert Welch a kind and affectionate letter. She resolved a thousand times that since the man she had loved was for ever beyond her, no one but Robert should have a word or look from her, and in some future time, she thought, she would surely find herself suddenly as much in love with him as he had been with her. But that time was not yet, and she could not help enjoying her freedom. In that sweet north country, too, white with the blossom of

April, and green with the coming of May, what else could she do but look up at the hills and the blue sky, and like Aunt Janet, feel all her heart go out in thankfulness.

She was never tired of looking at the lake. There was a crag projecting over it at one point, and over the crag, but farther back, a bank rising to a wood, thick with trees, and brake, and briar. She made herself a niche above the crag and beneath the bank, and there she went morning after morning, and sat among the fern and moss, and lichen-covered stones, and let the fresh breeze find her face while she watched the sunshine dancing on the water. There she sat for hours together, and thought of her mother. She was never tired of thinking about her mother, and trying to imagine her wandering as a girl in sight of the mountains. Sometimes, for Miss Wood always seemed puzzled to know what to do with her, when she was in-doors, she went to her nook in the evening. It seemed to fill her whole soul to watch the setting sun, and when the mist fell softly like a veil upon the lake, and the clouds stole round the hills, clothing them with a heavenly mantle, the beauty of the place almost made her sad, and she wondered that in it Richard Brandford had had any heart left, even for Clare Clayton. She had seen nothing of him since her arrival, and as the days passed on she began to hope that it might be possible to escape him altogether. She could not ask her aunt any questions about him, the process was too troublesome, for Miss Wood was as deaf as a post, but the Brandfords seemed to be great people in the place, and she heard their names repeatedly. Once when she stopped to admire an old woman's garden on one of her rambles, the owner of it came out, and with North-country politeness showed her the flowers, and remarked that Mr. Brandford, up at the Laurels, had sent her most of them.

"Ah, there's no one like him," the woman said, "always thinking of one and doing some good, and saying nothing about it, and forgetting it as soon as it's

done. He hasn't too many words, but he's all thought and deeds for one, he is." It brought the tears to Polly's eyes with thankfulness.

"I knew he was good, I always knew he was," she thought, "and if he somehow behaved badly to me, I am sure there is some explanation of which I do not dream." It made her grateful to hear his praises, and happier in remembering that once she had cared for him so much. "Dear Dick," she thought, "I do hope you are as happy as the day is long, and that your wife loves you with all her heart; but she can't help doing that, I know;" and she went on her way.

"I wish I could do something more for aunt Maria," she said, as she trudged home, "I am not the least a help to her by being here." But Miss Wood had lived so long alone, she had learned to like her own company, and to think all other tiresome after a little while. "I hope I shall not be deaf when I am a settled down old maid, it must be very dreary never hearing voices," Polly thought, as she went along. She felt sure she would be a settled down old maid, for long as she would to do so, she did not feel in the least like writing to Robert Welch the words that he told her would bring him, and yet she thought of him dearly and tenderly, just as she would have thought of a brother. "I believe Robert, somehow, is naturally my brother, though no one knows it," she thought, one day, "some men are born to be one's brothers."

A pony-carriage was at Miss Wood's door, and the next moment Polly found herself face to face with Richard Brandford's wife.

"How do you do, Miss Dawson?" she said, looking wonderfully bright and pretty under a blue-veiled hat. "I am so sorry for all your troubles, I heard about them from Miss Wood, and about your illness, too. I have come on purpose to carry you off for a long lonely drive; you are not strong enough to walk far yet, I am sure. Oh, yes, you must come." In almost consternation, Polly refused, but she would not hear her, and Miss

Wood insisted, and at last, sorely against her will, she was seated in the phaeton, and Clare, laughing and merry as a cricket, jumped in after her, and sent the ponies off at a full gallop, rattling on as fast as she could about all sorts of things, while Polly sat very still, and wondered if she could be awake.

"Funny that we should meet at that stupid 'at home,' was it not?" she said; "I was so surprised at seeing you there. I'd made Dick take me. Of course he didn't like it, and behaved atrociously, as he always does at parties."

"Doesn't he like parties?" Polly asked.

"Like them; no, he hates them, that is why I make him go to one, if I can. If there is one thing more than another I enjoy in this world," she said, "it is making Dick miserable."

"Oh," Polly said. Mrs. Brandford was a charming wife, she thought, making Dick miserable was the last thing she would have thought of or dared to do. They went on at a tearing pace, and Clare, taken up with the business of driving, was obliged for once to stop her chatter.

"Lovely ponies, are they not?" she said at last when they came to a smoother portion of the road, "but apt to get very saucy if they are not taken out. Dick declares I shall be pitched face downwards into a ditch some fine day with my mad driving, but that is only one of his favourite disagreeable speeches," and she laughed. "He gets worse than ever, I think. I tell him he ought to come and drive them, but he never does. My husband lets me do just as I like; he is very busy, and I always go about alone. You must come and dine with us one day, Miss Dawson."

"Oh no, thank you," Polly began, more frightened than ever.

"But I shall insist on it as soon as you are a little better. I shall come over one afternoon and fetch you. By-the-way we are quite near the Laurels, would you like to go in and see the place?"

"Oh no, thank you," Polly said, still more alarmed; "it is so nice driving," she added in excuse.

"Very well, on we go. These fields all belong to his high and mightyness."

"Who is his high and mightyness?" Polly asked, more and more astonished.

"Why, Dick of course!" She certainly had a surprising way of speaking of her husband, Polly thought.

"And is that house, the Laurels, up there?" she asked, for it was dark when she had passed it.

"Yes, it is in a lovely situation, is it not? I always think this is an exquisite road." Suddenly a face appeared on the other side of the low stone wall which separated the meadows from the road, and she pulled up in an instant. "Dick!" she exclaimed; "why, fancy your being here."

Polly turned slowly round, and found herself being stared full in the face by Richard Brandford.

"Enjoying one of your helter-skelter races over the country, eh, Clare? How do you do, Miss Dawson?" he gave her a little formal bow, and said the few words in a tone that would almost have done credit to Margaret Albury.

"You had better get in, these animals won't stand still for small talk," Clare said, tugging at the reins; but he declined. "Oh, well, if you won't, goodbye, and good riddance, Mr. Bear," and they tore on. "I always call him a bear," she explained to Polly, who wondered how she could be so disrespectful. She would never have dared to do such a thing in their most intimate days. "He's so like a bear, isn't he, he has just that creature's silent, retiring habits. You knew him very well in London, did you not, Miss Dawson?"

"Yes," she answered slowly. "I knew him in London before he was married."

"Married!" she exclaimed, opening her merry blue eyes in astonishment; "he's not married!" and she jerked at the reins till the unfortunate ponies nearly shied.

Polly started forward, "Is he not your husband?" she asked, her heart standing still.

"My husband!" and she laughed till the tears trickled down her face. "No, thank goodness, not he. What put such a mad idea into your head?"

"It was in the paper."

"Ah, I told papa-in-law Felix it should have been Richard Brandford of Derwent Hollow, and not merely of Benthwaite; but between ourselves, papa-in-law Felix objects to Dick being the head of the family, and said it wasn't necessary, especially as Dick's place is not actually in Benthwaite proper, and Richard's is. Both the cousins were named Richard after their grandfather. Dick is the elder branch, and is always called Mr. Brandford by the multitude, and Dick by the family, to distinguish him from my husband, who is Mr. Richard Brandford proper. I told the mighty owner of the Laurels that some folks might think he was the martyr, but he was extra disagreeable about that time, and said he didn't care what they thought. What an excellent joke! I shall never forget it; I'll send for him on purpose to tell him."

"I must have been mad to judge him so," Polly thought, remembering with dismay the dreadful little note she had sent him, and all the consequences it had brought upon her. She could quite understand his being too proud to answer it.

"I certainly never shall forget it," Clare laughed again. "Why he never even looks at any one. I'd as soon marry a bat. No, he is a confirmed old bachelor, and does not care for anything but his books and long walks, and the good of his tenants. He is wonderfully kind-hearted, and always thinks of the right thing to do." It was sweetest music to Polly to hear Clare singing his praises, and to know that she might listen, and think of him again without shame or self-reproach.

"I knew he was kind," she said shyly, for she could no longer speak of him calmly, as she had five minutes ago. "He looks it. Do you know, Mrs. Brandford,"

she went on, "I passed you and—and—your cousin a long time ago one morning in High Street, Kensington ; it was the year before you were married. I think that helped to make me think it was he that——"

"I see. A year before, and in High Street, Kensington. I remember meeting him one morning there, about that time. I had had a squabble with Richard, my husband, and we were both very foolish, and Dick meeting me, gave me a good scolding, and was the means of its being made up again. I was so glad, for I was horribly in love with Richard, only you know how silly engaged people are, and how often they are ready to suspect the person they love of all manner of things of which they would be ashamed to suspect their merest acquaintance."

"Yes, I do," Polly answered chokingly, thinking that it really would be a great satisfaction if Dick could beat her for her wickedness, and it was almost a pity that that was impossible under any circumstances.

"Dear old Dick," his cousin went on, affectionately, "he really is a very good boy, and the best of it is he has not an idea of it, and would be rather indignant, and above being good if he knew it. I always call him a boy," she went on ; for Polly had no words to answer, though there was a flush upon her cheeks at which Clare vaguely wondered, "but he must be three or four and thirty by this time, and his beard makes him look so old. It will end by making him bald, and then he'll be a horrid fright, and I often tell him so. No, Dick will never marry," Clare repeated ; "I wish he would, the Laurels wants a mistress. The secret of it is he hates being bound or obliged to do anything ; he has almost a mania on that point, and he'll never love a woman well enough to give up his freedom and his queer ways for her sake. If he did too, I don't believe his pride would let him own it even to himself : he is a very queer individual."

Polly seemed to tread on air as she bounded upstairs. It was happiness too great to be believed. To know that he was not married, and not mean and false, and

all that Margaret Albury had suggested, but just what her heart had always, in spite of everything, known him to be! It was too much. She felt as if life were suddenly too sweet to be borne calmly. It was too late for all that might have been; for, after all his goodness and unselfishness, she must never marry any other than Robert Welch, and it was impossible now to do that, but it was not too late to think of the man she had doubted. She would just spend her whole life in thinking of him. And oh, the sweetness of being able to do that! What a fool he had been not to trust him; not to believe in his face and her own heart, the two things that had never deceived her, it had cost her a life spent with him. But this at least she could do; she could devote all her life to loving him, and she would. He would probably never know it, but she was his still in thought, just as she had been always, and would be or ever. Then she sat down then and there, and wrote to Margaret Albury. It was indeed happiness to be able to tell her that Dick was all that he had always seemed to be. "Do you remember what you said about it's being the best thing that could happen to one to give good love to one great nature with whom one is in perfect sympathy, dear Margaret? That is what I shall give to Dick. I dare say he is too angry ever to forgive me, even if he knows, or it was so mean of me to doubt him; but I shall just be true to him for ever. That will content me, I think, for I never used to think of marrying him, or of his caring for me; it was sufficient to like him, and to know that there was no harm in it. You know, if one loves very, very much, one has no time to look beyond, or to think of what one is going to get back again. One only longs and strives to be better and better, a thousand times better than one ever has been, so that the love one gives may be as nearly perfect as one can make it. The only thing that worries me now is that I feel I can never marry Robert, and yet it

is very difficult not to believe that he will some day find some one a hundred times better than I, and who will make him a hundred times happier than I should. I am very glad when I think of him to know that Dick must be too angry ever to care for me again ; but even if he did, nothing should induce me to marry him. I would not be so cruel to Robert."

Margaret Albury was vastly amused at this letter. " Poor dear little Polly," she said to herself, " I should like to know what you would have to say for yourself after five minutes' talk with Mr. Brandford. I don't think many of these heroic resolutions would survive." And then she wrote and called Polly a little idiot, and told her that if her hero asked her, the best thing she could do would be to marry him. " As for keeping single all your life to contemplate his many virtues, and extreme beauty, that is all nonsense," she explained, " and will do neither of you any good. As for Robert, of course you can't marry one man and love another. But Robert is far too good and unselfish not to rejoice in your happiness, at any cost to himself. Don't be foolish any more, Polly. I dare say Richard Brandford has forgotten all about you, but if he hasn't, don't plague two men instead of one ; that would only be foolish."

" That is just it, he has forgotten me," Polly said bitterly, as she read Margaret's letter ; for nearly a week had passed, and she had heard and seen nothing of him, and he could easily have come to her had he wished it ; and she knew now that, in spite of all her fine thoughts, she had been longing and hoping to see him. She had had all manner of day dreams in the happy days after her meeting with Clare, of its all coming right in spite of poor old Robert. It would of course be very difficult to meet Dick, she had thought, but perhaps when she did he would take her fate out of hands, and then how happy she would be, and how she would do everything in the wide world that best would please him, and how she would let him scold and tease her, and laugh at her for

her foolish doubt, and she would tell him that it had after all arisen out of her great love for him, for she was only just a foolish little girl, not half nor a quarter good enough for him to care about, and it had seemed impossible that he should.

But she heard nothing of him, though Miss Wood remarked that she had seen him with Mrs. Richard Brandford one morning, and so she knew that he had seen Clare, and was at Benthwaite still. Once or twice she fancied she saw him in the distance, but before she could even be sure that it was he, a sudden fright seized her, and she retreated as fast as possible. And when ten days went by she despaired, and felt that he did not mean to forgive her. "If I could only see him for one single moment," she said to herself one evening, as she sat watching the light fade over the water, "if I could just see him once more, and hear him say that he forgave me, and cared for me ever so little, and then die in that one perfect moment." But the perfect moment did not come, and the days passed by without any word or sign, and the contemplative love did not answer, and Polly was miserable enough at last, and gave up all hope of ever hearing his voice again.

CHAPTER XIII.

POLLY HAS IT OUT WITH DICK.



RICHARD BRANDFORD laughed heartily, he could not help it, when Clare told him, with a very wry face, how she had been supposed to be his wife.

"I believe she must have got hold of the story when she wrote that letter," he thought. "The little cat," he said to himself; "I wonder what she'll have to say for herself." He tried very hard to come across her. He knew he must in time, in a small place like Benthwaite, and so he waited and would not write.

Polly's letter had been a sore point for nearly a year with him, and he felt that he should be very glad to rub it out of his memory, perhaps as glad as Polly's self, who knows? A week passed by; but he did not see her, and he grew impatient. It was no use pretending that he did not care, he did. He cared very much indeed, and longed with all his heart to see her, and thought that if she would only have him still, he would marry her to-morrow. He walked about the house with quite a new feeling, and quite a strange happiness in his heart when he thought that perhaps in a little while it would be Polly's home too. It would be so nice to see her about the place; he laughed with happiness while he even thought of it. Polly, blithe and busy, as she was sure to be, with the colour on her cheeks again, and a song upon her lips. He thought of a dozen saucy things she would say, and twenty things she would do when she came home. Of how she would arrange the flowers in the rooms herself, and scatter her work, and books, and music all about; of all the little airs and graces she would play off upon him, and her disappointment when he pretended not to see them. They would take such long

walks together, for he thought she would soon get stronger than she had looked the other day, and she always liked walking, and they would improvise picnics among the hills. It would be so delightful to marry Polly, and bring her home, and he would do anything in the world for her, for he knew she would expect nothing, and exact nothing but what he chose to give, and so she should have everything. How happy she would be too, and how dearly she would love him, for though he had never been able to understand her letter, he had felt, and did feel again now, that she had long ago given him her whole heart, and in some vague way he knew that it was his still. He wondered at it. He could not understand what she found to like in such a grim old savage ; but he knew that it was so, and she should be as happy as he could make her —his dear little girl who had never once seen him come to the dingy house without a welcome betraying itself in her eyes, and seeming as if it longed to find utterance at her lips.

But a week passed without his meeting her.

“ She hides herself as carefully as a nun,” he said, almost savagely, when ten days had passed ; but he saw her one morning at last, and followed at a respectful distance till she had passed beyond Benthwaite and through the gate that led to the wood. She was on the way to the nook she had made for herself. He lost sight of her as she disappeared quickly through the trees ; but he knew that she must come out at a given point, and he followed on. “ Now, young lady, you are caught,” he said, as he emerged from the wood at the end near the crag, but she was nowhere to be seen. “ I believe the girl is a witch,” he said angrily. Then he looked over the bank, and there, seated among the moss, and fern, and lichen-covered stones, was a little figure draped in black. “ Polly ! ” he said.

So he had found her at last ! Her heart gave a bound of happiness so acute it ended in a sob that was almost pain. She rose to her feet, took his extended hand, and climbed up the bank. She dropped it when she reached

the summit, and stood trembling almost like a culprit before him, waiting for him to speak.

"Polly," he said, "why, what a long time it is since I saw you—that is, to speak to." He spoke calmly enough, almost coldly.

It stung her to the quick, and helped her to regain her self-possession immediately. "Yes," she answered gently, "a very, very long time, and I thought——"

"Well, what did you think?" he asked, in something of the old teasing manner; and he looked at her, and could not help noticing how different she was from the Polly of old—the Polly to whom beads and bows and trinkets and ribbons were second nature. Yet, as she stood there in her plain black dress, with her hair falling low on her forehead as ever, but with the colour gone, with much of the roundness, from her cheeks, there was something which drew her closer to him, and found its way to his heart much more readily than all her beauty and coquetry had formerly done.

"I thought you were married," she said humbly.

"Yes, I know you did. What a goose you were;" and he laughed.

"Oh, don't!" she cried; she could not bear to hear him laugh when she was so miserable, and longed to sit down and cry. "Oh, don't! don't!" and she put her hands up to her ears to shut out the sound. How could he laugh when she was so wretched, and aching for some sign to show she was not forgotten—how could he be so cruel? She had just been thinking that if she met him again, she would tell him all she had heard and supposed, and implore his pardon for her doubt, and that perhaps then he would forgive her and take her to his heart again, and all the past would be forgotten. But to meet him thus, oh, it was cruel!

"Oh, don't what?" he said, still mockingly; but his manner softened a little as he saw the soft dark eyes fill with tears, and the sweet lips, which formed such a contrast in their redness to the white cheeks, tremble.

"Nothing," she answered—"only let me go; please

let me go ;" and she moved a step forward, but he stood in front of her. "I must go, indeed I must," she said, imploringly.

"Tell me first why you wrote me that letter, you heartless little coquette."

"I thought you were going to marry Miss Clayton," she said ; and she raised her head proudly ; "my aunt told me, she was going to be married to a Mr. Richard Bradford, and naturally I thought it was you, and—and—"

"And what?" he said, dimly beginning to understand it all.

"And I saw her, and asked her, and she said 'yes.' I did not know your cousin's name was the same as yours, and I could not bear that you should think I was—"

"You were what?"

"A girl you could make a shuttlecock of as you pleased ;" and the light flashed for a moment from her eyes, and the old flush came back into her cheek ; "and so I wrote you that letter. I thought I would not let you know I had found out anything, but—"

"But that you would do a little diamond cut diamond business, I see. You had a great deal of faith in me, considering I had assured you only a day or two before of my affection."

"I know ;" and her eyes filled with tears again, and the light died out of them, "that is where I was so wrong ; but then you know you told me that you loved me, but you never said a word about anything else, and—"

"And so you judged me in the letter and not in the spirit," he said sarcastically. "Well, perhaps you are right ; a woman has no right to consider herself bound to any man, or he to her, until he says formally, 'Will you marry me ?' and she answers formally, 'Yes.' I did not think you had so much of the paternal legal spirit in you, Polly."

"Will you let me go now ?" was all she could reply ; for she could no longer stand this dreadful meeting, which was crushing all hope and life out of her.

"Yes, you can go if you like," he said, standing

aside for her to pass ; but she did not move. " Well, are **you** going ? " he asked.

" No, " she said chokingly, and she put out her two hands imploringly for a second, and then drew them quickly back ; but he caught them in his, and drew her unresistingly to him.

" I almost think you care for me still, " he said ; " do you ? "

" Yes I do ! I do indeed ! "

" And can you believe I love you now ? Why I have never cared for any one else, you little goose, and never shall, " and he put his arms round her, and laughed with happiness, just as he had when they walked across the fields a year ago. " And will you marry me after all, Polly ? " he asked. Then suddenly she burst into tears.

" Oh I can't, " she cried. " I do love you with all my heart ; but I must never marry any one, unless it is Robert Welch."

" Robert Welch ! " he exclaimed, astonished. " Why Robert Welch ? I never expected to hear a young woman say that she loved me with all her heart, but wanted to marry another man."

" But I don't *want* to marry him, indeed, " she cried ; and then, in the excitement of the moment, she stood up, and straightway related the whole story, not sparing herself in the least. Perhaps it was a good thing that she did, seeing that he had to hear it ; for when she was calmer she would have found it more difficult. It told him more than she thought for, it shewed him all that he had been to her, and all she must have suffered, and though he said nothing ; as he listened he thought in his heart that he would make it all up to her in the days that were to come.

" And you don't really wish to marry Mr. Robert Welch ? " he asked, when she had finished, and stood shame-faced and trembling again, waiting for what he would say.

" No, " she said, " I don't. You know I don't ; only I cannot bear to pain him."

"Oh, and pray whom do you wish to marry then?"

"I—I—"

"Do you wish to marry me?"

"No."

"I believe you do," he laughed; "I am quite certain that I want to marry you, and I shall;" and he pulled her hand through his arm, and they looked at each other and laughed again. And so they went on through the wood to Benthwaite.

Polly found it very difficult to tell Robert Welch of the change in affairs; but in his reply he was careful not to say a word to give her pain, or to let her see how hard the news had been to hear. He did not see her again for a long time, but he goes to Benthwaite every year now, and he is as much in love with her as ever. And Polly knows it, and Polly's husband knows it, and everybody connected with her knows it; but there is no harm in it. His love for her is too simple and true and thorough to contain a single thought of wrong; moreover he extends his affections to those who are dearest to her now. Polly bullies him terribly, because, she says, "Dick won't put up with it, and somebody shall;" so she torments him. He is still single and well-off, and talks of settling down sometimes, and Polly threatens to find him a wife; but he shakes his head, and thinks he will wait till she is old, and he can find a face that pleases him better. And Polly will never grow old, for she is one of those women who always remain young, and whose age is only like tired youth.

The house at Kensington is let to a newly-married couple and a baby and a perambulator and a pretty nurse-maid. It is papered and distempered inside, and picked out in many colours. Outside it is painted red, and to the street door there is affixed a brass knocker that suggests to the thoughtful caller all manner of curious gim-cracks within. Thus it is so changed and beautified that if you hunted all through the parish you would never be able to guess which was once the dingy house at Kensington.

